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SANTA CLARITA'S
TOP 10
STORIES OF
2019



10 Stories that Shaped the SCV in 2019

2019 was eventful in the Santa Clarita Valley, in a multitude of ways. As the year drew to a close, as we do each year, The Signal has taken a look back at the stories that shaped and impacted our community throughout the year. Presented in the following pages are 10 of those

stories. This is not a “ranking,” per se, as such a device would seem crass considering the gravity of some of the stories, and the devastating impacts some of these stories had on the people of the SCV. We are republishing selected stories in their entirety, but in many cases these are mere samplings of the coverage, as some of these stories resulted in literally

dozens of articles covering various facets of a story as it evolved. From politics to milestones to crimes and disasters — and the community’s resilience in pulling together through them — these are the news stories that, in our view, had the most significant impacts on the community we love, a community we are proud to call home.

The Saugus High School Shooting

In 16 seconds, three young lives were cut short and a community suffered an unprecedented heartbreak. The morning of Nov. 14, 2019, goes down as the day the SCV joined the ranks of communities across the nation that have experienced a shooting on a public school campus. Student Nathaniel Berhow, on his 16th birthday, pulled a handgun from his backpack in the school’s quad and started

shooting. He killed fellow students Gracie Ann Muehlberger and Dominic Blackwell and wounded three others before turning the gun on himself and taking his own life. What happened in the days and weeks that followed was a remarkable demonstration of a community pulling together, rallying to support the victims, to support the students and staff of the high

school, and to demonstrate that this community will not be defined by the shooting. It will be defined by its spirit. Presented here are just a few of the many dozens of stories and photos published about the shooting at Saugus High — including the initial breaking news story of Nov. 14 and the coverage of the community vigil at Central Park just a few days later.

2 dead, 4 injured in shooting

By Emily Alvarenga, Jim Holt, Caleb Lunetta and Tammy Murga
Signal Staff Writers

(Nov. 15, 2019) Saugus High School was the scene of America’s latest school shooting Thursday, when two students were killed, and four other students, including the shooter, were wounded. Two Saugus students, a 16-year-old girl and a 14-year-old boy, died from gunshot wounds inflicted at the school as classes were just beginning, Capt. Kent Wegener, spokesman for the Los Angeles County Sheriff Department’s Homicide Bureau, said during a news conference. In all, five students were shot — two girls, aged 16 and 15, and three boys, two of them 14 and one 15. The shooter, who shot himself in the head, was 16. A seventh victim suffered an injury described only as not a gunshot wound. At a news conference held at Henry Mayo Newhall Hospital where three of the victims and the shooter were taken, it was revealed that two students succumbed to their injuries, a third was reported in stable condition and released from the hospital and the fourth remained at the hospital in critical condition. The two other shooting victims were reportedly doing well at Providence Holy Cross. “Their conditions were good and fair earlier,” Holy Cross spokeswoman Pat Aidem said late Thursday afternoon. “They’re going to be staying the night because they were both hit by gunfire,” she said. “They’re in good spirits.” Asked if they’ve been watching the news, Aidem said: “They have TVs in their rooms.” Parents for each of the two survivors at Holy Cross were at the hospital, she said. “We had grandparents arrive for one of them,” she added. Law enforcement officials confirmed the identity of the suspect as Nathaniel Berhow, who turned 16 years old Thursday. Although sheriff’s officials and hospital staff would not confirm the shooter by name, they acknowledged the fourth student brought to the hospital, and who remained there in what Sheriff Alex Villanueva called “grave” condition, was, in fact, the suspect. The suspect was still in critical condition as of Thursday evening with a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

Teacher aid

The shooting began shortly after 7:30 a.m., when the suspect entered an open area called the quad, between school buildings, pulled a gun from his backpack and began shooting students. The shooting happened outside of the choir room where the choir teacher, Kaytie Holt — daughter of Signal staff writer Jim Holt — and her students heard gunshots. “Three to five students ran into my room. They told me they heard gunshots. I immediately locked my door and I got all the students in my room into my office.” “There was about 40 of us in there. Once we were in my office with all the lights off, (one of the students) who ran into my room, not a choir student, told me she believed she had been shot.” “I went to get the gunshot-wound kit from my room. When I returned, I inspected the wounds. She had two, one on her side and one on her left shoulder.” “We had the gunshot-wound kit, so I dressed her wounds and we waited there, I don’t know how long. Not too long,” she said. “She laid down and eventually the police came and got us out of the office. Then, paramedics came and took the girl,” she said. “When she left my room, she was responsive. She was able to tell them her name, her birthday, everything like that.”



Dan Watson/The Signal

Anxious teenagers and parents wait to be reunited with Saugus High School students at Central Park in Saugus after a shooting incident at Saugus High School on Thursday. The shooting left two dead and four others injured, according to officials, who said the shooting suspect also shot himself.

Students transferred

Saugus students were bused to Central Park near the school where they systematically reunited in groups of 20 at a time with their respective parents. Students were standing in line on the back soccer fields of Central Park waiting to be interviewed and checked out before being released to their parents. “They’re just re-checking the rooms,” said board member Joe Messina, who was outside Saugus High. “They’re making sure we don’t have any kids who are still hiding, thinking there’s something going on. (The deputies) are doing a great job.” Dozens of sheriff’s deputies were on the scene at Central Park, interviewing students as they were unloaded from buses.

Anxious parents

Many of the reunited students burst into tears at the sight of their parents. Most parents ran with open arms at the sight of their child, hugging them for long periods. Joe Osbron was at the park waiting for his son, Joshua. “My brother-in-law was driving by the school to work this morning at 7:30 and he said he heard gunshots, so he tried calling me five times,” he said. “He gave me that heads up and from there, being home, watching the news, texting my son who was in a classroom. He was north of where it happened. They were locked down in class. And, he was there for about an hour before they (police) got to his classroom.” Osbron was one of many parents relieved to learn their children were OK but saddened to hear about the victims. As he waited for his son to be among the ones escorted by deputies to waiting parents, other students quickly found their parents eagerly searching for them.

Shocked students

“I just got to school and I usually hang out at the athletic director’s office and we were just talking and hanging out there and that’s when it happened,” said Alan Barbosa. “We heard three shots outside the window. We didn’t know what it was. We looked through the window, we see kids running by. We just knew and said,

‘Let’s lock the door, turn out the lights and just hide.’ “After a while, the police came and got us and brought us to the church,” he said, referring to Grace Baptist Church. Student Tyler Kebler, reunited with his family, had a similar experience. “I was on campus, after my math class,” he said. “All I know is two kids walked in and said, ‘Shots were fired in the quad area,’ and so our teacher immediately locked the door and turned off the lights.” “A bunch of kids started barricading the door,” Kebler said. “Then we sat there until police came and got us out of our classroom, then escorted us to the gym.” Saugus High student Hannah Schooping-Gutierrez said she heard three shots during first period, while she was at the library. Her first instinct was to run, leave all of her belongings and get off campus, she said. She and senior Lauren Farmer went off-campus and found a student who lives across the street, and was taking in students who were fleeing the campus for safety.

They said they hid until they thought it was safe to come out. Wegener said a search warrant was being sought for the suspect’s residence in Saugus, and students who witnessed the shooting were being interviewed at Grace Baptist Church. “The suspect was later identified as one of the victims who was found in the quad. He is identified as a 16-year-old male whose birthday is today,” Wegener said. “The weapon that he used was recovered at the scene. It’s a .45-caliber semiautomatic pistol, which had no more rounds in it.” “Detectives have reviewed the video at the scene, which clearly shows the subject in the quad withdraw a handgun from his backpack, shoot and wound five people, and then shoot himself in the head,” Wegener said. “There are no other subjects who are outstanding as part of this incident.” FBI officials confirmed at 11:40 a.m. Thursday during a live news conference that there were no other threats suspected at any other schools in connection with this incident. Later in the day, Wegener and FBI officials were asked by reporters at the hospital about a text sent out a day before the shooting as a perceived threat.

Online threat examined

“I also want to acknowledge, and I believe most of you have reported on this, a posting on the bio of what we believe to be the suspect’s Instagram account and I quote, it says... ‘Saugus have fun at school tomorrow.’ “I can confirm that that was posted on his (subject’s) Instagram account and I can also confirm that it has been changed since this incident which means someone else has access to his account, be it a hacker or a friendly who has his password.” “That was posted at one point. We are aware of it so we are researching the source — when it was placed and when it was taken down,” he said. “We have not yet established a motive,” Wegener said. “We have found no nexus between him and the victims, other than they were all students.” A team of politicians — state, federal, county and local — told of support services set up for grief and trauma counselling at various places in the SCV.

Support services

During the morning news conference after the shooting, county Supervisor Kathryn Barger praised sheriff’s officials for arriving on the scene within two minutes of the report of the shooting. At least half a dozen ambulances and numerous Santa Clarita Valley Sheriff’s Station vehicles descended on the school shortly after 7:35 a.m. By 10:30 a.m., hundreds of students gathered at Central Park in Saugus, while dozens of media outlets gathered in the south end of Central Park, awaiting a news conference announced by Sheriff’s Department officials. Meanwhile, hundreds of parents were also standing by, clutching their phones waiting to hear from their children. “The impact of this on the school is tremendous,” Barger said, noting support teams had been set up to work with students. Santa Clarita Mayor Marsha McLean, who said she was overcome with an “indescribable” feeling knowing her granddaughter was at Saugus High, said the city was working to set up counseling for families at the Activities Center on Centre Pointe Parkway. Counselors were available for grieving families Thursday night.



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What a year it's been in the Santa Clarita Valley!

I am proud to serve this beautiful, resilient community. I look forward to a prosperous and healthy new year with more exciting opportunities to collaborate and make our county stronger for the next generation.



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Community in grief

Thousands attend Central Park vigil, seek to begin healing process after last week’s fatal school shooting

By Emily Alvarenga
Signal Staff Writer

(Nov. 19, 2019) Thousands gathered in Central Park Sunday night to remember the lives lost Thursday at the Saugus High School shooting, and reuniting in their grief, they shared a message.

“We will be OK,” Saugus High ASB President Andrei Mojica, 17, said. “We are resilient, we are courageous, we are loving and, most of all, we are Saugus strong. ... The road to recovery is not easy ... but I am confident that the sun shall rise on us once again.”

This vigil was the first time Saugus Principal Vince Ferry had spoken publicly since the incident, and as he stood on stage, choked up with emotion, he said, “I will do it.”

“I want my first words to be focused on Gracie and Dominic and their families,” he said. “I want my first public words, that I know will be far too inadequate, to be heard by my students and my staff. ... Tonight, the most important part of truly being Saugus strong is to grieve together. Through our tears, our hugs, our words of kindness, our remembrances of Gracie and Dominic, we will become stronger. Strength is not the withholding of tears or the waving off of pain. Strength is the ability to welcome our tears in the midst of pain.”

Students, staff and parents were joined by thousands of Santa Clarita Valley residents as they paid tribute to 15-year-old Gracie Anne Muehlberger and 14-year-old Dominic Blackwell, who died as a result of their injuries.

“Since Dominic entered this world, he brought love and joy to everyone he’s encountered,” Blackwell’s uncle Chris said. “He was quick to assume his role as a big brother. Full of love and a strong sense of duty, Dominic guided his three brothers as best he could. ... It was impressive to watch Dominic mature into a young man.”

In addition to family, Blackwell’s friend and fellow ROTC cadet Emma Bartel said, “It will be a long, painful walk to class without him on Dec. 2.”

“My heart breaks for his family and for the pain that they’re going through,” she added. “Nothing can replace his loss, and no words can heal our hearts, but we can honor him by remembering him. We will not move on without you, but rather move on with you in our hearts, holding your memory close to us and remembering all the good times together.”

Muehlberger’s oldest brother, Riley, graduated from Saugus this year, and is serving in the Navy. Though stationed in Florida, Riley had recently flown home to surprise his sister for her 15th birthday Oct. 10 — the last time he would see her.

“I’m so happy that my last memory with you was giving you a big hug at 5 in the morning before I had Dad drive me down to fly back to resume my normal life,” Riley said. “I woke you up and hugged you and you hugged me back, even though you were half-asleep. I never could imagine that this hug would be my last.”

Muehlberger’s parents, Bryan and Cindy, wrote a letter that was read at the vigil, which told about the 15-year-old’s life, including her love of Starbucks, her infectious laughter and her strength.

“Gracie was a freshman in high school at Saugus,” the letter read. “She was only barely 15 when this tragic event occurred. She only spent 14 weeks in high school. It’s just too short of a time ... It all came too soon ... Gracie will remain alive in our hearts and the hearts and minds of all of you and the rest of the world.”

Addison Koegle, 14, who was also injured during the incident, recorded a message that was played at the vigil, which shared a few things about her best friend.

“Gracie was unique, and she cared about others the way no one else could,” Koegle said. “Just being around her was one of the best feelings in the world, and I wish I could be around her just one last time ... I promise each of you that I will make something amazing out of this



Cory Rubin/The Signal

Crosses for Gracie Ann Muehlberger and Dominic Blackwell, who died in the Nov. 14 shooting at Saugus High School, are surrounded by gifts and mementos at the Central Park flagpole during the #SaugusStrong vigil on Nov. 17.



Cory Rubin/The Signal

(Above and below) Santa Clarita residents gather around a memorial set up at the Central Park flagpole Nov. 17 during the #SaugusStrong vigil in honor of the victims of the Nov. 14 fatal shooting at Saugus High School.

horrible situation — Gracie would have wanted me to.”

As chants of “Saugus” rang out through the night, Mayor Pro Tem Cameron Smyth said he’s never been so proud to be a part of the Santa Clarita community.

“The eyes of the nation turned to Santa Clarita, and what they saw was a community that first protected one another, who then supported one another, have

lifted up one another and have loved one another,” he added.

‘Spreading love’

Among those in attendance were former students, like Eric Kimura, Class of 2013 alum who was handing out tissues and candy. “We’re just spreading love, which is what we all need right now.”

Others were handing out the 5,000

blue and orange remembrance ribbons that were made by volunteers, including parent Mercedes Rodriguez, whose son is a Saugus football player.

“It’s been pretty challenging for him,” she said. “He didn’t sleep for two nights, he kept saying, ‘They’re shooting.’”

Rodriguez’s husband died in June, which she said made this incident much tougher. “To have all that grieving going on, and then to get that phone call,” she said, “was like another stab right in the heart.”

Marcia Davis was an instructional assistant at Saugus for 12 years before retiring two years ago, and said it was hard to see an incident like this happen.

“It’s a little too close to home,” she said. “These people are suffering a lot ... and I don’t think that this community can heal ‘til after tonight. I think this is going to be what’s going to help everybody pull it together.”

“Our hearts break as we offer condolences to the families of our students who lost their precious lives or were injured and will face long and arduous recovery,” added Superintendent Vicki Engbrecht of the William S. Hart Union High School District. “My also heart goes out to our young people who endured the terror of that day and have forever lost their innocence. In the face of unspeakable violence, we have united to care for each other and to begin the slow process of healing, knowing that none of us will really ever be the same again.”

Those who wish to send their support can visit saugusstrong.org.



Back to school



Gilbert Bernal/The Signal

(Left) Andrei Mojica, a Saugus High School senior and student body president, speaks at a news conference held Dec. 2 as he and his peers return to school for the first time since the deadly shooting Nov. 14 that claimed three students' lives and wounded three others. (Right) Saugus High School students return to school.

By Emily Alvarenga
Signal Staff Writer

(Dec. 3, 2019) The morning school routine felt different for many Saugus High School students Monday, as they returned to school for the first time since the deadly shooting that left three dead and three others wounded.

"As we enter our campus today, we know that things will not be the same," said senior Tyler Nilson, student body vice president, adding, "likely in the future, they will never be the same."

These first moments, as students step back onto campus to resume their classes, are important for the Saugus community, Nilson said during a news conference held at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints next door to Saugus High, where the media was assembled in order to allow the students to return to school with minimal distraction.

"Saugus High School experienced a tragedy, the likes of which it had never seen before, and in the wake of that

shooting, we've experienced bonding moments of unity, love and compassion, the likes of which we have never seen before," Nilson added.

Skye Hanamaikai, senior class president, agreed, adding that this has allowed the students, staff and parents who were drastically affected to bond closer together.

"I'm not going to lie, it's been very confusing and difficult these last two weeks. However, as unwelcome and unwanted this tragedy has been, the response from our community has surpassed any expectations," Hanamaikai said.

While Andrei Mojica, student body president, asked that everyone keep sending their love, kindness and positivity, he also emphasized the importance of taking care of one another.

"It's just so crucial to talk to someone, to make sure that each of us feels valued and that everyone validates themselves," he said. "We need to take some time to find ourselves again and try to feel some

sense of normality. ... It's going to be really difficult, but I know that, through this sense of community, once more we will be OK."

"In the midst of this tragedy, I think a lot of us have learned to open our hearts to anyone, no matter who they are, because in the end, we all need the support," added Chris Tanaka, junior class president.

The William S. Hart Union High School District's objective is to allow students to return to their normal routines, according to Deputy Superintendent Michael Kuhlman.

"It's our mission to take care of the students and the staff in the wake of what happened these past few weeks," Kuhlman said.

In order to do so, the district has expanded enforcement on campus, assigned a number of additional staff, including campus supervisors, counselors and substitute teachers, as well as deployed therapy dogs throughout the campus.

"Even prior to this tragedy, we had established mental health and wellness as a priority for our district," Kuhlman added. "We have 50 therapists who are permanently deployed on all the campuses throughout our district to be able to provide the mental health needs of our students. We know that it's not enough, especially in the wake of what happened these past few weeks, but it's a start."

As the Saugus community begins to move forward, Bob Jensen, president of the district's governing board, said the district wants Saugus High to remain a safe place.

"Our goal is to provide a safe environment and have our schools be a place where learning, understanding and growth can take place as each of our students see fit," he said. "It's important as a district and as a community that we move forward now with faith and hope, courage and strength."

Survivors share their stories

By Caleb Lunetta
Signal Staff Writer

(Nov. 15, 2019) "Shooter, shooter! There's a shooter!"

That was the first thing Saugus High 10th-grader Nathan Ephren remembers hearing while he walked onto campus Thursday morning. Then he heard shots ring out, echoing through the concrete structures and tunnels around the quad.

"I was heading to school and I was just walking inside — I was heading to the basketball court, where me and my friends usually hang out — and the next thing I heard was gunshots," said Ephren. "Someone was just yelling, 'Shooter, shooter.'"

Without thinking, he and his friends turned and ran.

Soon after, he and a handful of friends made it to Central Park, where they sought refuge, and Ephren's first concern was where his sister was. "She has first period, and I don't," Ephren recalled thinking to himself.

"She was fine, but she was really sad because she was 10 feet away from the shooting," Ephren said, talking about a phone call he had with his sister as he ran to Central Park. "I kept calling her to make sure she was safe."

Over the phone, his freshman sister told him she'd meet him at Central Park.

They eventually were reunited, but because of her proximity to the shooting, Ephren's sister was taken to Grace Baptist Church nearby for immediate counseling and interviewing.

While his parents sat next to one another on an outside patio at Grace Baptist, talking with family over their phones, Ephren shot a basketball on a hoop on the church campus.

"I never thought this would happen at our school," he said, as he put down the basketball.

Survivors

Saugus 10th-grader Max Gamel said he was putting away his golf clubs near the quad when he heard what he thought was a plastic bag popping.

"All I heard was the first shot, and usually people pop a bag or something, and everybody didn't think much of it," said Gamel. "And then a bunch of shots happened in succession."

"We heard screaming, and instinctively, we told everyone to get down," said Anthony Matic, 17. "I was just worried that the shooter might come to our classroom, and we might have to do something about it."

As kids either ran out of the school or were escorted out, others stayed inside of their classrooms, hiding under or behind whatever furniture they could find.

"I was in my (economics) class, and we saw some people running outside,"



Bobby Block/The Signal

A deputy opens the door for community members exiting the emergency grief-counseling center set up in response to the Nov. 14 deadly school shooting.

said Justin Khoo, 17. "We barricaded the doors, stayed there and waited for police to come."

Khoo said he and his classmates had trained for a lockdown. They learned, from the moment they stepped on

Saugus' campus as freshmen, to turn off the lights, lock the doors, block the windows and sit in the middle of the classroom, in silence.

"It made us feel more safe ... more secure."

After waiting for a bit, Matic's class eventually saw a sheriff's deputy standing in the door. They were told to get in line and walk out. They would walk or ride a school bus a little over a mile before reaching Central Park, where they could be reunited with their parents.

Before the kids could be discharged to their parents, they would have to be checked in by school staff and law enforcement officials and given a short interview. The lines stretched out over the Central Park soccer fields.

"It's totally black, all you want to do is get to the school," said Matic's mom, Ad Madolin. "It's the scariest text message I've ever gotten."

Lans Carstensen, a father of a senior and freshman at Saugus, said his son was able to get to a friend's house because he was about to be dropped off for second period. His daughter, who was in choir at the time, was sending her dad texts about how she was scared, but all right.

"It's horrible, it's incomprehensible," said Carstensen, as he stood on his tiptoes to see over the crowd, trying to spot his daughter. "It's going to be good to see her."



Bobby Block/The Signal

Those affected by the deadly shooting at Saugus High School the morning of Nov. 14 had access to grief counseling services to help them cope.

Soledad Trailer Lodge

The abandonment of the Soledad Trailer Lodge mobile home park happened gradually, almost to the point where neighbors didn’t really notice until it had become a haven for squatters and people engaged in illegal activity.

But, in 2019, the mobile home park became a virtual ghost town as former tenants moved out, one by one, transforming the former park once described as “one big family” into an eyesore.

When all was said and done, the mobile home park would be demolished and gated off, and the site now awaits potential new development.

An abandoned SCV community

By **Tammy Murga**
Signal Staff Writer

(Feb. 28, 2019) The place looks like a ghost town — at least during the day.

Old Christmas lights slouch on the walls, dirty tablecloths sway from the breeze coming in through the broken windows and stone angel decorations hang next to overturned toys.

It’s the scene of what once appeared to be a community where families relaxed on their porches while children played just feet away.

Soledad Trailer Lodge, located on Soledad Canyon Road and Solamint Road, is a park made up of more than 30 mobile homes built in the 1960s. Today, it’s an abandoned mobile home park in Canyon Country, notorious among its neighbors for becoming a potential haven for drugs, graffiti and other illegal activities.

“Right now, it looks horrible,” said Santa Clarita resident Debbie Jones. “There’s graffiti, the windows are broken and the people ‘living there’ are not the ones living there. It’s an eyesore; it’s dirty.”

Law enforcement regularly visits the site either to patrol or respond to crimes involving the mobile home park in some way. Among those cases is Saturday’s incident when Santa Clarita Valley Sheriff’s Station deputies searched the park for a suspect in connection to an armed robbery at Joe’s Liquor, which is located adjacent to the mobile home park.

The manager at the liquor store said, “People just look next door to us and see the place and it’s just not a good look for business. It’s not a good outlook in the community.”

Multiple residents have called the city of Santa Clarita to complain about the poor condition and crimes surrounding the property, but city officials said there’s



Signal file photo
Stone angel decorations hang outside a mobile home at the Soledad Trailer Lodge.

only so much that can be done.

“As long as the mobile home park is a mobile home park under the state, (the state) has jurisdiction for almost everything,” said Erin Lay, a city housing program administrator.

This means the city, including code enforcement officers, can’t go into the property to resolve some of the park’s current issues, such as graffiti, trash and broken windows, because all mobile home parks are generally under the control of the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD).

The city filed a formal complaint against the property owner, Robbco Properties, with the state in October to address Soledad Trailer Lodge’s conditions, Lay

said. HCD soon responded.

“We have issued a notice of intent to suspend the permit to operate for nonpayment of annual fees,” Alicia Murrillo, a communications analyst with HCD, said Wednesday. “If we do not receive a response to the notice of intent, we will suspend the permit to operate.”

She added that at this point, the department doesn’t know what the park owner has planned for the property. According to a statement of information document submitted to the California Secretary of State, the business owner is listed as Ira Robb, who’s also listed as the owner of Valencia Travel Village and Vestal Watches. According to his bio as an advisory committee member of the

nonprofit Foundation for Animal Care and Education, Robb is the retired president of Enterprise Rent-A-Car of Southern California.

On Wednesday, the owner could not be reached for comment regarding the condition of and plans for the mobile home park.

City Communications Manager Carrie Lujan said “no one has submitted any plans for it,” in regard to someone possibly purchasing the abandoned location. At this point, the city is waiting to hear back from HCD on any updates regarding a response from the property owner.

Lay said the city was notified by HCD that an inspection of Soledad Trailer Lodge has been scheduled in the coming weeks.

Former Soledad Trailer Lodge tenants share stories of how, why they left when they did

By **Tammy Murga**
Signal Staff Writer

(May 4, 2019) It was like any other community, except that the neighborhood described by a resident as “one big family” eventually dissolved almost collectively by fear and defeat.

That’s how three former tenants of Soledad Trailer Lodge, the abandoned mobile home park in Canyon Country, described their last moments at the locale.

Security guards now secure the park’s perimeter, and the once-active mobile home park is now partially piles of rubble near the intersection of Soledad Canyon and Solamint roads.

The park has sat without tenants for months.

Before the security guards were added, multiple neighboring businesses and members of the community reported witnessing graffiti, drug use and homeless individuals entering the homes. Some neighbors went as far as calling the park an “eyesore.”

On Feb. 28, The Signal ran a story about the abandoned park’s run-down condition, followed by coverage of demolition work that commenced March 1.

Despite a slow demolition, which has halted due to an ongoing environmental-related investigation, mobile homes that are left standing still carry belongings left behind by what once appeared to be a normal community.

This is their story as they tell it.

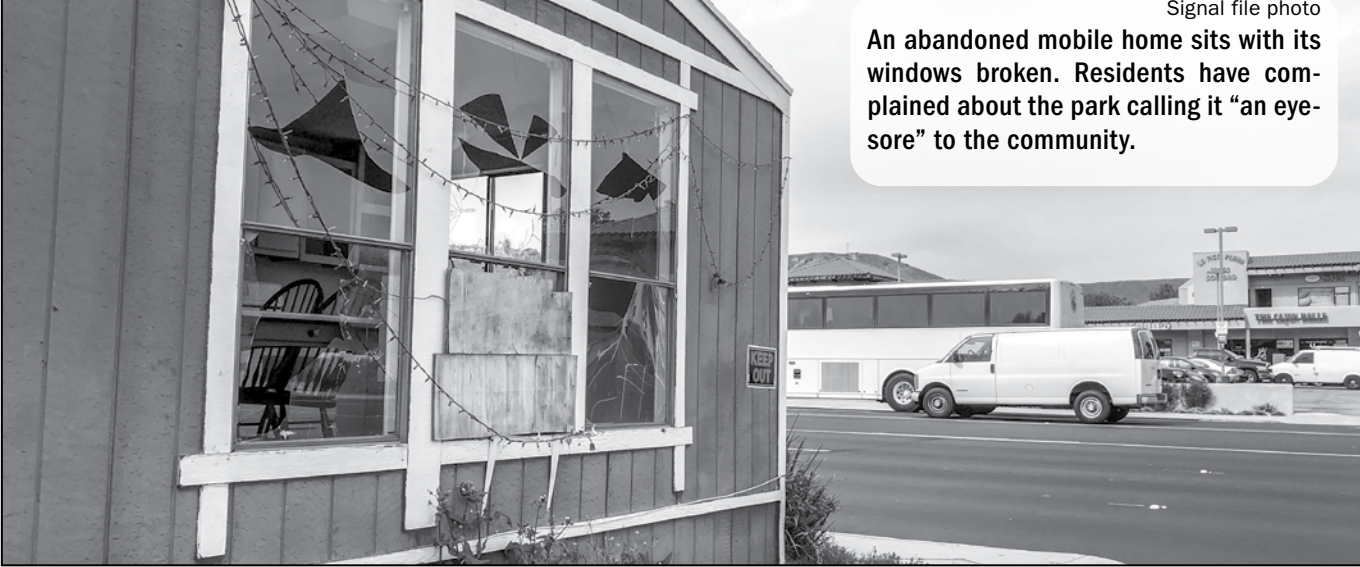
The tenants

If he could describe the community in three words, former 12-year tenant Juan Alex Rodriguez would say “one big family.”

“We all knew each other,” said Rodriguez, who alternately speaks in English and Spanish. “We all celebrated birthdays together, and all the kids would play outside. There was one girl there who wanted to celebrate her quinceañera, but she didn’t have a dad, just her mom. So, we all pitched in ... to make it happen.”

But perhaps what he misses most about living in space No. 23 was that the residents, many of whom are of Latino descent and worked in construction and gardening, respected the fact that he had four autistic children and two toddlers. “No one complained about the noise; there was peace there,” said Rodriguez, a construction worker who has since moved to Palmdale.

Palmdale resident Maria Castro, who lived near the front of the park, kept busy cleaning and tending to her three children, who went to nearby schools for eight years. “There weren’t bad people living there,” she said. “We didn’t have any problems with the other tenants.”



Signal file photo
An abandoned mobile home sits with its windows broken. Residents have complained about the park calling it “an eyesore” to the community.

A third former resident, who wished not to share his name, lived at the park for about eight years with his wife and two children.

“They were nice times,” he said in Spanish, “but I knew it was time to leave when things got very serious.”

The beginning of the end

When they moved in and throughout their stay, the three residents and their families said conditions of the leased mobile homes weren’t adequate. Some spent time and money changing or adding flooring, replacing windows and deep-cleaning rooms.

Castro said she enjoyed keeping her unit as clean as possible, but after she injured her knees due to her tattered porch, she thought mobile home park landlord/manager Pat Crellin would help with repairs. Several requests made were left unanswered, she said.

But that was not the only instance where requests for repairs were not addressed, the tenants said.

When it rained, homes flooded, including when a pipe broke in Rodriguez’s space. “Our drainage was always bad. It would leak, flood and get everything wet,” he said.

Due to several failed attempts to reach Crellin, tenants took matters into their own hands. At one point, Rodriguez called his mobile home park insurance company, Pacific Specialty Insurance, regarding the “unlivable conditions of the park after flooding” to see if he could receive funds for a new place to live — but his claim was indefinitely closed, according to a letter from the insurance company in December 2018.

“To date, we have attempted to contact your landlord without success,” the letter read. “We are currently closing (your) claim at this time, and will reopen once the required documentation and return call from your landlord is obtained to review your claim further.”

The California Department of Housing and Community Development, which has jurisdiction over the park, also received “several complaints of sewage problems over the years,” according to spokeswoman Alicia Murrillo.

One of those complaints, received May 29, 2018, detailed how the tenant “tried communicating with the park manager but he is not answering, and I’ve tried calling a plumber but he would not fix the problem. Any assistance is appreciated.”

Conditions only worsened when people at night would trespass into the park to engage in illicit activities due to a lack of security, according to the former tenants and surrounding businesses.

Crellin did not respond to a request for comment on this and previous stories after multiple efforts made via phone and email.

About the manager

Crellin, who is listed as a Santa Clarita Realtor, had been the manager of Soledad Trailer Lodge for several years. Things were fine until talk of demolishing the park and building a new development began, according to former residents and sources who knew of the plans.

Crellin had submitted three “one-stop review” applications from 2015 through 2018, according to city Senior Planner James Chow. “It’s not a permitting process,” he said. “(Those who submit a one-stop review application) just get some preliminary comments and general feedback from city staff and Los Angeles County Fire.”

The latest application was for a project that would have included 147 apartments and 8,000 square feet of office commercial space, Chow said. City officials have been unable to ascertain why Crellin stopped moving forward with the plans. Councilman Bob Kellar confirmed the initial plans were to transform the property into housing.

The owner of the property, Robbco Properties, led by Valencia Travel Village owner Ira Robb, has not responded to multiple requests for comment.

Leaving the park

It wasn’t until summer 2018 that residents began to leave the homes they had rented for years after learning about the plans for development.

Tenants were told verbally to vacate the units by a given date and law enforcement would be called on them should they refuse to leave, according to multiple accounts by former residents.

“People were too scared, so many of them left,” said Castro. “Those remaining got a written notice to leave.”

Castro, Rodriguez and their families were among the last to leave.

“I was the last to leave because I wanted tenants to take action and not be scared,” said Rodriguez. “These were our homes, and we felt like we were being kicked out with our children so easily and unjustly because we were seen as ignorant.”

Sgt. Danial Dantice with the SCV Sheriff’s Station said via email that the Sheriff’s Department had no information regarding any evictions. The Los Angeles County Superior Court has one unlawful detainer case listed brought by Robbco Properties during the summer of 2018.

The case, filed in August 2018, involved Rodriguez’s wife as the defendant, and the court ruled in favor of Robbco Properties, ordering Rodriguez to move out.

The former tenants, all residing in and around the Santa Clarita Valley, said this chapter of their lives is one they don’t like to remember, despite the good memories they had with their neighbors.

Still, Rodriguez said he would like to see justice for tenants’ investment and the unresponsiveness of the landlord and owner.

The Tick Fire

Devastation.

When the wind-swept Tick Fire raged through the eastern Santa Clarita Valley this fall, it prompted the largest evacuation in the valley’s history. About two dozen homes were destroyed as the blaze consumed more than 4,600 acres.

What emerged in the days that followed were tales of heroism, by first responders and residents alike, coupled with the human drama of homes and possessions lost, and even anger as residents took issue with public safety power shut-offs that left some rural residents unable to pump

well water to protect their homes as the fire approached.

Presented here is a sampling of the stories and photos that each portray a slice of the multifaceted story of the most devastating fire to hit the SCV in the past several years.

Firestorm in the SCV

By Jim Holt, Caleb Lunetta and Tammy Murga

Signal Staff Writer

(Oct. 25, 2019) Wind-swept flames roared down Tick Canyon Thursday, burning at least half a dozen homes, threatening hundreds more along the northern edge of the Santa Clarita Valley, and forcing the evacuation of between 40,000 and 50,000 homes from Saugus to Agua Dulce.

The fast-moving fire burned nearly 4,000 acres as of Thursday evening, sparked a second fire near Castaic Lake and a third fire in the heart of Val Verde.

Burned homes

At least several homes burned in the SCV Thursday. However, fire officials could not confirm the total.

“Numerous homes were burned,” Supervisor Kathryn Barger said at a press conference at 8 p.m. “But, we cannot get an accurate count during the evening. So bear with us.”

“We know there is at least six (burned homes) but that number may rise,” she said.

One house that went up in flames was off of Poppy Meadow, on Rhododendron Drive near Melia Way, according to Ben Cather, who learned of the loss from his brother, Matthew, whom he said tried to organize his neighbors to fight the fire on their own.

“My family lives off Poppy Meadow, where the fire raged with no support due to competing fires,” Ben Cather said.

“My brother and family were told to evacuate. There were no fire trucks in sight and a police officer came to the house and told them that they were on their own and to pack and leave,” he said.

“My brother decided to organize an effort with the neighbors and homeowner to fight the fire on their own,” Cather said. “He was able to save multiple houses on the street with flames coming up to the property lines. However, one house on the street did go up in flames, unfortunately.”

Asked how many homes burned, Fire Department spokesman Sky Cornell said: “We don’t know how many homes were burned.”

Homes seen burning on Abelia Drive, Park Glen Drive and Shadow Pines Boulevard are among the homes being reviewed by fire officials, who are expected to have a number to report by Friday morning, Cornell said.

Additionally, two homes that were seen burning in Castaic, including a structure on The Old Road, were also among the homes being tallied by officials in the assessment of damage done.

“There are some structures that were burned in the Tick Fire and the Tick Branch 10 Fire,” Marvin Lim, spokesman for the Los Angeles County Fire Department, said earlier in the day.

Overnight efforts

Los Angeles County Fire Chief Darryl L. Osby said 500 firefighters and four water-dumping helicopters would be working throughout the night on the Tick Fire.

“We have zero containment,” he added. “There were 10,000 structures impacted. We do have several structures that were damaged.”

Osby said damage assessment teams are expected to reveal Friday how many homes were burned.

“We’re expecting stronger winds tonight. There may be some re-populating of some communities,” he said, referring to aircraft assessing damage from the air.

Sheriff Alex Villanueva of the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department said deputies would be posted on evacuated streets overnight.

Road closures

The southbound lanes of Highway 14 were shut down from Palmdale to Newhall for most of the afternoon. Northbound lanes of the highway, however, remained open, Cornell said.

Caltrans reported no closure of Interstate 5 in the Santa Clarita Valley as of Thursday evening after it was partially closed in the afternoon.

“The northbound I-5 was closed due to fire personnel needing the freeway for firefighting. The northbound 5 was closed at Lake Hughes (Road) for around one hour, maybe a little more,” California Highway Patrol Officer Josh Greengard said, noting the southbound lanes of I-5 remained open Thursday.

CHP Capt. Edward Krusey told the 8 p.m. press conference that all highways were open but that the off ramps on the southbound lanes of Highway 14 at Soledad Canyon Road and Sand Canyon Road were closed.

Power outages

Residents in neighborhoods affected



Bobby Block/The Signal

Castaic resident Alex Forde inspects the damage the Tick Fire caused in late October.



Cory Rubin/The Signal

A house on the 29500 block of Sequoia Road in Canyon Country burns in the early morning during the Tick Fire.

by the Tick Fire were — ironically — among the more than 1,600 in Los Angeles County without power after Southern California Edison pulled the plug Thursday in an effort to prevent brush fires.

Leona Valley, Green Valley, Lake Hughes, eastern parts of Canyon Country, the Shadow Pines neighborhood, Lake Hughes and Agua Dulce were areas left without power when Edison shut off their power, a protocol Edison calls a Public Safety Power Shut Off, or PSPS.

The same blackout areas experienced the first PSPS outage on Oct. 10 when a red flag warning was issued due to heightened fire risk conditions.

Evacuations

At 6 p.m., Cornell put the scale and scope of the Tick Fire into perspective, explaining with the use of a map, just now many SCV residents were displaced.

Evacuations for residents affected by the Tick Fire occurred in two main areas.

The first area of evacuations was happening south of Highway 14, north of Placerita Canyon Road and west of Sand Canyon Road.

The second and larger evacuation area was described by Cornell as being north of Highway 14, south and east of Bouquet Canyon Road and south of Vasquez Canyon Road, between Plum Canyon Road and Agua Dulce Canyon Road.

Acres burned

By Thursday evening, the number of acres burned by the Tick Fire totaled 3,950.

During the firefighting efforts, one of the helicopters sustained damage in a bird strike. No one was hurt.

It all began shortly after 1:30 p.m., when Los Angeles County Fire Department officials responded to reports of a fast-spreading brush fire in Canyon Country, and especially Tick Canyon.

The vegetation fire was reported near the intersection of Tick Canyon Road and Summit Knoll Road shortly after 1:40 p.m., running uphill and threatening structures, according to Fire Department Inspector Sean Rios.

In just less than an hour, the fire had grown in size from 200 acres at 2:03 p.m. to more than 850 acres by 2:50 p.m. with “an immediate need for structure protection,” according to the Fire Department.

Homes threatened

By 2:10 p.m., officials announced a third alarm response to the Tick Fire, with multiple homes threatened. Both air and ground units were called to the scene, according to officials.

Weather conditions challenged fire suppression efforts as strong Santa Ana winds were reported gusting at up to 55 mph, which is expected to continue through Friday morning, according to the National Weather Service.

The California Highway Patrol issued a Sigalert at 3:31 p.m. on the northbound lanes of Highway 14, with heavy traffic congestion reported as far back as to where Interstate 5 and Highway 14 meet.

The William S Hart Union High School District announced all career and college readiness classes and some events were canceled as a result of the Tick Fire, according to Public Relations Officer Dave Caldwell. Those events include all outdoor activities at Canyon High School, La Mesa Junior High School, and Thursday football games at Golden Valley and Saugus high schools.

School closures

As the fire intensified and spread, Hart District administrators announced that all William S. Hart Union High School District classes were canceled for Friday.

Schools in the Sulphur Springs Union School District, Newhall School District and Saugus Union School District were also scheduled to be closed Friday. The Santa Clarita Valley International School is also closed Friday.

Due to fire conditions, all classes at the California Institute of the Arts and events there were canceled Thursday.

Evacuated areas

An evacuation center was set up briefly at Golden Valley High School but changed to a much larger venue at

See TICK, S22



City of SANTA CLARITA

Mayor Cameron Smyth, Mayor Pro Tem Bill Miranda,
Councilmembers Bob Kellar, Marsha McLean and Laurene Weste



Members of the Santa Clarita City Council and other dignitaries cut the ribbon for the Newhall Ranch Road Bridge expansion project on Wednesday morning. (The Signal)

Tammy Murga February 27, 2019 7:31 pm 390 Comments

City, community celebrates completion of Newhall Ranch Road Bridge expansion



Angelenos take the first dirt at the Canyon Country Community Center during a groundbreaking ceremony on Friday, March 15, 2019. (Courtesy of the city of Santa Clarita)

Tammy Murga March 18, 2019 10:45 am No Comments

City celebrates start of Canyon Country Community Center



Carlos Smith, 5, takes a turn at the big show at the 2019 Santa Clarita Cowboy Festival. (The Signal)

Caleb Lunetta April 18, 2019 9:32 pm No Comments

2019 Cowboy Festival kicks off with thousands of attendees



Amgen Tour of California rolls through Santa Clarita. (The Signal)

Caleb Lunetta May 18, 2019 2:48 pm No Comments

Amgen Tour of California rolls through Santa Clarita



City of Santa Clarita Mayor Marsha McLean, right, joins poet laureate, Laurene Weste, left, to unveil a Sidewalk Poetry Project sculpture. (The Signal)

Tammy Murga September 20, 2019 8:00 am 100 Comments


City celebrates 2019 Sidewalk Poetry project



Santa Clarita Mayor Marsha McLean, left, sits in a director's chair as she presents the 2019 State of the City. (The Signal)

Tammy Murga October 24, 2019 5:00 pm No Comments

City Council presents 2019 State of the City



Downtown Newhall was lit up for the Light Up Main Street holiday celebration held Saturday night, November 23, 2019. (The Signal)

Viviana Shields November 23, 2019 10:23 pm No Comments

Community unites for 'Light Up Main Street'

The Santa Clarita City Council would like to congratulate The Signal on another great year of telling our community's story!

Katie Hill’s Resignation

When Katie Hill was elected to Congress in 2018, she became a high-profile member of the Democratic freshman class, routinely making appearances on national television and positioning herself to become an influential member of the House.

In beating incumbent Steve Knight in November 2018, Hill had successfully “flipped” California’s long-time Republican 25th District, which includes

the Santa Clarita, Antelope and Simi valleys.

But less than a year later, Hill’s experience in Congress had come to an end. She resigned amid a House Ethics Committee investigation into allegations that she had an inappropriate relationship with a congressional staffer.

The investigation was spurred by a flurry of national media coverage after private photos and text messages were leaked depicting a three-way relationship

involving Hill, her estranged husband and a former campaign staffer.

By the time it was over, some new words and terms had become part of the SCV’s political lexicon, including “throuple” and “revenge porn.”

Hill resigned effective Nov. 1, and a special election will be held in spring 2020 to fill the remainder of her term before a new 25th District representative is elected to a two-year term in November 2020.

Hill resigns amid inquiry

By Perry Smith
Signal Managing Editor

(Oct. 24, 2019) After weeks of mounting rumors regarding allegations about her personal life, following leaks of personal pictures and text messages that led to a House Ethics Committee investigation, Rep. Katie Kill, D-Agua Dulce, announced her resignation Sunday.

Hill announced in a tweet Sunday afternoon at 4:03 p.m.:

“It is with a broken heart that today I announce my resignation from Congress. This is the hardest thing I have ever had to do, but I believe it is the best thing for my constituents, my community, and our country.”

Hill announced she would step down from Congress amid allegations of improper relationships with staffers and an investigation opened on the matter by the House Committee on Ethics.

Emily Burns, her chief of staff, was not immediately available for comment.

When reached by phone Sunday afternoon, Hill said she wasn’t planning to resign at the beginning of the leaks

of personal pictures and texts, but it became clear there were “hundreds of pictures and texts” that were being threatened to leak.

“They’ve made it clear that this is their purpose — to force me to resign, and I want to make sure I can do it in a way that allows me to do it with some shred of dignity and allow me to continue to work in my community,” she said.

Once that became clear to Hill, she said she held a meeting with her team and was planning to work with House leadership to wrap up her congressional work.

“I had just told my staff,” Hill said Sunday. She said she did not have a definitive date for when her last day would be, as of Sunday.

Hill said the incident left her terrified for future women who might want to run for office.

“I think this is the barrier that made it impossible for me to continue successfully,” she said, referencing the as-yet leaked photos, and what she called cyberbullying in reference to nude photos



Hill

of her that had been leaked on the internet, and stories regarding an affair with a staffer, which she again denied Sunday,

which prompted a House Ethics Committee investigation last week.

It was clear in conversation with Hill she believed the divorce proceedings she was in the midst of were related to the leaks. However, she said despite the initial leaks, she was ready to continue until it became clear there was much more coming.

““OK, they’ve done it, what else can there be?”” she said, describing her initial reaction in discussion with the team.

“And then we literally find out that there’s been hundreds more.”

She said she was surprised the personal attacks didn’t come out during what she described as one of the most expensive campaigns, considering the national attention on the race. Hill became the first Democrat to represent the 25th Congressional District in 2018, after it was held by Republicans for more than 26 years. She said she planned to help Democrats keep the seat after she stepped down.

“It’s unprecedented,” she said, in reference to the leaks. “It’s something that I can’t operate under.”

Cemex Refuses to Go Quietly

It’s one of the longest-running political battles in Santa Clarita Valley history, and in 2019 there were several key developments in the decades-long saga in which multinational mining giant Cemex seeks to mine 56.1 million tons of sand and gravel from a site in Soledad Canyon, just outside the eastern boundary of the city of Santa Clarita.

Local activists and the city have long fought to stop the mine, citing its impacts on the environment, air quality and the quality of life for local residents.

In March 2019, the Interior Board of Land Appeals ruled that one of Cemex’s Soledad Canyon two contracts was invalid and the other would expire in 2020.

In May, Cemex filed a federal lawsuit seeking to overturn the IBLA ruling.

Then, in December, the BLM announced Cemex now owes \$25 million in back payments to the government.

As 2020 begins, the final nail has yet to be pounded into the Soledad Canyon mining coffin.

Feds respond to new Cemex lawsuit

By Tammy Murga
Signal Staff Writer

(Aug. 2, 2019) Within months after the city of Santa Clarita and mining opponents declared victory in the decades-long battle with Cemex due to a government ruling, international mining conglomerate Cemex has filed a lawsuit in federal court seeking to overturn the decision.

In March, the Interior Board of Land Appeals ruled that one of Cemex’s two 10-year contracts was invalid and the second contract expires in July 2020. Due to the time necessary to secure the proper permits and infrastructure for the mine, city officials and other government leaders considered the decision a win, and the matter, for all intents and purposes, resolved.

“After being elected, I met with (city officials) and thought this is something we can help with,” said Rep. Katie Hill, D-Agua Dulce, who sent a letter to the BLM days before the long-awaited decision was announced, back in March.

“There’s no way that Cemex can continue to move forward in the next two years. This means that we’ve won.”

Hill could not be reached for comment Thursday.

However, a lawsuit filed May 1 by Cemex is questioning the “win” on the grounds of the decision by the Interior Board of Land Appeals, which handles appeals for Department of Interior decisions. Cemex sued the U.S. Department of Interior, the IBLA, the Secretary of the Interior and the Bureau of Land Management, asking to “vacate” the IBLA and BLM decisions, which the lawsuit describes as “unlawful.”

The federal government filed its response July 15, answering to each of the claims, noting admissions and denials regarding the allegations in Cemex’ complaint.



Signal file photo

Cemex, an international mining conglomerate, has filed a lawsuit challenging decisions made by the Bureau of Land Management.

had commenced in 2000 — despite the fact that Cemex could not have legally mined at that time because it lacked the necessary regulatory approvals.

“That decision, and the decision of the IBLA affirming it, were arbitrary and capricious, and violated the Administrative Procedure Act, Federal Land Policy and Management Act, agency regulations and the Constitution.”

The complaint also stated that the “(d) efendants unlawfully deprived Cemex of its rights to realize the benefits of its decades of investment in the permitting, litigation defense and other costs for the project, which total more than (\$28 million).”

For its part, the city of Santa Clarita does not have a response planned, according to Mike Murphy, the city of Santa Clarita’s intergovernmental relations manager and point person on the Cemex battle for the past two decades. Murphy announced his retirement plans in June, and his retirement becomes effective Friday.

“I don’t believe the city is going to participate in the litigation in any way between Cemex and the Department of Interior over the appeals decision and early decision to cancel the contracts,” he said.

“There’s nothing new in this suit that we have not seen before in terms of the arguments that Cemex made. It’s just moved the same arguments onto a new venue.

“Our attorneys have looked at both the filing and response, and they have



Signal file photo

A lawsuit filed by Cemex — an international mining conglomerate — alleges its mining rights have been illegally deprived. In March, the Interior Board of Land Appeals ruled that one of Cemex’s two 10-year contracts was invalid and the second contract expires in July 2020.

advised us that this is a multiyear process.”

Santa Clarita City Councilwoman Laurene Weste said she wasn’t surprised by the move, adding the City Council is on summer recess until the last week of August, and that the city planned to “stay consistent.”

“We’re on hiatus, so there’s nothing going on right now that the City Council is working on. It’s predictable that (Cemex) would disagree with the decision but litigation is a normal process,” she said. “We will stay consistent and persistent and will continue to do our job for the community.”



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Deputy-involved shooting

When a man began behaving erratically outside a fast food restaurant near the Valencia Industrial Center on Sept. 12, workers inside became concerned. And when he started removing items of clothing and dancing, they called the SCV Sheriff's Station.

What transpired next became a major news story: The man assaulted the first responding deputy, who called for backup. And when backup deputies arrived, sheriff's officials said the man continued his aggressive behavior, trying to attack the deputies.

The altercation ended up with the man being shot and killed by a sheriff's deputy on Rye Canyon Road. It served as a reminder that, even in one of the nation's safest cities, law enforcement officials can become involved in deadly situations on any given day.

Fatal shots in SCV

By Jim Holt, Brennon Dixon and Tammy Murga
Signal Staff Writers

(Sept. 13, 2019) A bare-chested man “yelling and screaming” outside a business on the edge of the Valencia Industrial Center became embroiled in a fight with responding deputies and, in the end, was shot twice in the torso by one of those deputies and killed.

The identity of the deceased man was not released by detectives assigned to the Los Angeles County Sheriff Department's Homicide Bureau, only to say he was a 35-year-old Hispanic man.

One deputy, after being punched in the face during a scuffle with the man, was taken to Henry Mayo Newhall Hospital where he was treated for minor injuries.

The punched deputy was the one who fired the two lethal shots, said Lt. Brandon Dean of the Homicide Bureau.

The incident began at 12:40 p.m. with a phone call to the Sheriff's Station from a business owner on Rye Canyon Road, near The Old Road.

“The call was for a suspicious person described as a male Hispanic, with no shirt, yelling and screaming,” Dean said.

“A single deputy responded,” he said. “He made contact, at which time the suspect attacked him.”

“During the fight, the suspect was able to disarm the deputy of his radio and taser. The suspect was swinging the radio, which at one point, broke the windshield of the deputy's car,” Dean said.

“The deputy was able to get to his car radio and ask for assistance,” he said.

“Within minutes, the assisting deputies arrived,” Dean said. “As soon as they got there and made contact with the suspect, the suspect charged at them with a wooden stick and another fight ensued.”

“During the fight, one of the deputies was struck in the face and a deputy-involved shooting occurred. The suspect was struck at least twice in the upper torso,” he said.

“(The suspect) was pronounced dead at the scene. One deputy was taken to the hospital and treated for minor injuries and was reported to be in stable condition,” Dean said.

Homicide detectives were called to investigate the incident.

Special investigators with both the Internal Affairs Department of the LASD and the Justice Integrity Division of the Los Angeles County District Attorney's office were notified as a matter of policy and procedure and were expected to begin reviewing all aspects of the deputy-involved shooting.



(Above) **Cory Rubin**, (Right) **Bobby Block**
(Above) Los Angeles County sheriff's deputies investigate a deputy-involved shooting at the corner of Rye Canyon Road and Avenue Stanford in Valencia on Sept. 13. (Right) Multiple deputies responded to the incident, which claimed the life of one person.



Dean said homicide detectives were to begin interviewing witnesses shortly after 5 p.m.

About 1 p.m., when the shooting happened, deputies shut down a stretch of Rye Canyon Road from The Old Road to Avenue Stanford, roping an area around the fatal shooting with yellow police tape.

Two sheriff's vehicles, with their red-and-blue emergency lights flashing, protected an area around the body of the deceased man.

Within minutes of the shooting, deputies notified homicide detectives as a matter of protocol, referring all official comments to them.

“We are working on a deputy-involved shooting,” Shirley Miller, spokeswoman for the Santa Clarita Valley Sheriff's Station, said at the scene when it first happened. Sheriff's deputies urged local residents to avoid the Rye Canyon

and Avenue Stanford area Thursday afternoon while the scene was being investigated.

Although initial reports indicated no deputies were injured, the SCV Sheriff's Station reported on its official Twitter account at approximately 2:30 p.m. that a deputy was injured. “There was one deputy who did suffer minor injuries, and was transported to the hospital.”

That tweet was subsequently deleted, and the injury was later confirmed by homicide detectives.

At 2 p.m., the SCV Sheriff's Station announced on its official Twitter account that there was no outstanding suspect.

Paramedics with the Los Angeles County Fire Department were dispatched

to the intersection of Rye Canyon Road at The Old Road at 12:50 p.m. for reports of a person experiencing some sort of psychological problem.

“We received the call as a psych rescue,” said Austin Bennett, spokesman for the Fire Department. The call of a “psych rescue with ALS” was placed by a deputy, Bennett said, referring to advanced life support.

Paramedics got to the scene of the psychological rescue at 12:53 p.m., Bennett said, adding no one was transported from the scene by paramedics.

“I didn't see anything, but I heard something,” said one employee of the Santa Clarita Public Works office at the corner of Stanford and Rye. “I heard shots.”

Aftermath of deputy-involved shooting felt in Industrial Center

By Jim Holt
Signal Senior Staff Writer

(Sept. 14, 2019) The mood inside a Valencia clinic with a front-row seat Thursday to a deputy-involved shooting that left a 35-year-old man dead was noticeably grim.

Patients filing into the Concentra clinic on Rye Canyon Road asked about the “commotion” that unfolded less than 20 feet from the panel windows that wrap around the waiting room.

Staffers pointed to the spot where deputies fought with a bare-chested man until one deputy shot him twice in the upper torso.

“Awful” and “terrible” were the words staffers shared with inquiring patients.

Asked if the man killed was a client of the clinic, clinic Director Rita Contreras said: “I can't talk about anything that happened.”

When a receptionist was asked for details, she grabbed a tissue, dabbed her eyes and said: “I can't talk about it.”

The clinic's business owner phoned the Santa Clarita Valley Sheriff's Station at 12:40 p.m. to report a shirtless man “yelling and screaming” near the clinic.

A deputy responding to the call radioed for assistance after the man attacked him, taking the deputy's radio and taser.

Other deputies responding to the call for help also got into a fight with the man, with one of the deputies suffering a facial injury.

That deputy fired two shots into the upper torso of the suspect, killing him, sheriff's investigators said.

Detectives with the Los Angeles County Sheriff Department's Homicide Bureau closed out the day Thursday interviewing clinic staffers and the employees of other businesses on the outer edge of the Valencia Industrial Center, between The Old Road and Avenue Stanford.

On Friday, detectives were still not releasing the man's identity.

Sarah Ardalani, spokeswoman for



Cory Rubin/The Signal
L.A. County sheriff's deputies investigate a deputy-involved shooting at Rye Canyon Road and Avenue Stanford on Sept. 13.

the Los Angeles County Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner, said a case number was assigned to the deceased man.

“Identification is pending notification of next of kin,” she said.

“The decedent is a Hispanic male in his 30s,” she said, noting an autopsy is pending.

Five SCV deputy-involved shootings in six years

Thursday's deputy-involved shooting brings to five the number of such shootings by Santa Clarita Valley deputies during the past five years. The previous four were:

Steven Burke Pettersen, 47, of Canyon

Country was fatally shot multiple times in the upper torso on Jan. 30, 2014, by deputies after he reportedly moved toward them with a knife in his hand.

Bruce D. Graham, 53, was shot and killed at his Castaic home Oct. 6, 2013, after emerging from the garage holding a rifle. He refused to follow commands to drop the rifle and then pointed it at deputies, who in fear for their safety fired at the suspect, a news release issued at the time said. “Both shootings were deemed justifiable by the (Justice System Integrity Division of the District Attorney's Office), and the district attorney's files were closed,” former sheriff's spokeswoman Nicole Nishida said of the shootings in

2014 and 2016, referring to Pettersen and Graham.

Miguel Angel Hernandez, 39, was shot and killed near Shangri-La and Nathan Hill drives in Canyon Country on Jan. 14, 2016, after he was pulled over by a deputy. In March 2018, a \$2.7 million settlement agreement was reached between Los Angeles County and the Hernandez family.

Bill Bowers, 51, was shot once in the chest and killed on Castaic Road near Ridge Route Road after being shot once in the chest on Aug. 2, 2016. In March, county supervisors authorized a \$4.6 million settlement in the wrongful death lawsuit filed by the Bowers family.



I'd like to thank everyone for pulling together this year during some very difficult and tragic times.

I think it speaks volumes about our great community of Santa Clarita.

From our Frontier family to your family, we wish you a very Happy, Healthy and Prosperous

2020

— *Joe Caso*



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Bella Vida Senior Center Opens

It was one of the most impactful “good news” stories of 2019: In April, after years of community fundraising, local government support and advocacy by senior advocates who wouldn’t rest until the job was

done, the Santa Clarita Valley’s new senior center — dubbed “Bella Vida” — opened on Golden Valley Road.

The new senior center quickly became recognized

as a gem of the community, a facility that will provide local seniors a place to gather, to socialize over meals, and participate in special events for many decades to come.

A beautiful start

By Tammy Murga
Signal Staff Writer

(April 25, 2019) Hundreds of community members joined elected officials Wednesday morning in cutting the ribbon to the highly anticipated, new Santa Clarita Valley Senior Center.

“The new center is officially open, so let’s hear it,” said Cecil Bernstein, 91, who has worked as a volunteer for the organization for more than eight years and officiated the ribbon-cutting for the opening dedication ceremony.

The just-completed 30,000-square-foot building, at 27180 Golden Valley Road in Canyon Country, opened its doors to the public for the first time under a new name: Bella Vida.

“We are not only introducing you to a magnificent building but to a new name called ‘Bella Vida,’ (which translates to) the beautiful life,” said Peggy Rasmussen, one of the project’s lead organizers and president of the board of directors for the SCV Committee on Aging, which oversees the center.

“Life is beautiful, and you need to stop sometimes and smell the roses. That’s what we do at the Senior Center a lot. This is a beautiful space we can share with the community and the seniors.”

And that’s exactly what people did Wednesday. From touring all the new rooms to relaxing on the outdoor cabana and reading the dedication wall, attendees were seen laughing, cheering and hugging all throughout the new center.

Among them were Valencia residents Anne Boyle and Judy Allen, who, together, have attended the Senior Center on Market Street for 15 years. “Even though this location is farther from home,



Cory Rubin/The Signal

Dignitaries cut the ribbon at the new Senior Center on Golden Valley Road in Canyon Country. The new location — located at 27180 Golden Valley Road — is scheduled to start offering services on Monday.

it’s worth the drive,” Boyle said. “We go to the crafter class, but the rooms are too small for 30 people. Now we’ll be able to get everyone in. We’re so excited.”

Arts and crafts are only part of what Bella Vida will offer. The new center includes a fitness and dance studio, six multipurpose rooms, a library and a kitchen designed to prepare 500 meals daily.

But it wasn’t an easy feat. Rasmussen and Kevin MacDonald, executive director of the center, shared what it took and who helped make the more than \$10 million vision a reality.

Teamwork consisted of developers Synergy and Brookfield Homes, who

donated 2.5 acres of newly developed land for the project; the city of Santa Clarita and Los Angeles County, which each invested \$3.6 million; and the thousands of donors who gave back during fundraisers and matching programs.

One of the most talked-about features of the center was the donor dedication wall located in the lobby, which reads, “In recognition of those who contributed to making this center possible.”

One of the several plaques on the wall reads, “In honor of Emma Benes. Love, Cindy Benes.”

Cindy, who donated \$500 to the project, said it meant a lot to see Emma’s

name on the wall.

“I never met her, but she was my great-grandmother,” she said. “(Emma) lived a hard life and wasn’t acknowledged or recognized throughout her life. But, really, the point is, I get to remember her with this wall.”

In recognizing the significance of the new center, L.A. County 5th District Supervisor Kathryn Barger said, “No longer is the Senior Center where people go and play dominos, although you can, or cards. It’s about being active. It’s about dance. It’s about getting up and experiencing life. This senior center takes it to a whole other level.”

Santa Clarita Mayor Marsha McLean, who was accompanied by the rest of the City Council, called the new facility a “labor of love” and a “social hub for the entire Santa Clarita community.” She mentioned some ways the city has worked with the organization to allow for a seamless transition, such as adjusting the transit system schedule for easier access.

The Market Street location is expected to close down Friday, and services at the new locale are scheduled to be available starting Monday, according to MacDonald.

The former Senior Center location is owned by Los Angeles County, and officials have not yet made a determination on what will become of the property once it’s vacated, according to Stephanie English, field deputy for Barger.

Barger plans to work with stakeholders to see what the best options would be for the next use of the property, which would ultimately require approval from the L.A. County Board of Supervisors.

Henry Mayo Hospital new wing

The Santa Clarita Valley’s only full-service hospital got a major shot in the arm in 2019 with the long-awaited opening of its new patient tower, bringing

with it 90 new patient rooms and, for the first time, the Center for Women and Newborns, providing neonatal intensive care.

It was a major step in the nonprofit hospital’s efforts to meet the expanding health care needs of a growing community.

Henry Mayo unveils new patient tower

By Vivianne Shields
Signal Staff Writer

(Oct. 11, 2019) After nearly 15 years in the making, Henry Mayo Newhall Hospital revealed its new patient tower Thursday with a ribbon-cutting ceremony and tower tour.

Community leaders, Henry Mayo board members, hospital donors, and a Henry Mayo Hospital celebrity were all in attendance.

The building is six stories tall with an underground story. It will connect the 45-year-old main hospital with the 30-year-old pavillion. According to a Henry Mayo news release, new additions include 90 private patient rooms with private bathrooms, a 29-bed Center for Women and Newborns, 22 antepartum/postpartum beds, and more.

Roger Seaver, CEO and president of Henry Mayo, has been part of the project since its beginning. He advocated for the tower’s creation until its construction began in October 2016.

“I’m proud of the [building],” said Seaver. “The people that get to work here and carry out their skills have a great place to work, so that means there will be great health care in this building.”

Gary Condie, founding chair of the Henry Mayo Newhall Health Foundation, reflected back on the infancy of the hospital. He recalls he and his friends pulling \$1,000 from their Christmas funds to help put in a helipad. Today, the new tower has a new permanent helipad that has direct access to the Emergency Department.

Judy Fish, Henry Mayo board member, said, “The building is beautiful, but it is the people who really matter.”

A Henry Mayo celebrity, Laura Battle, the first baby girl born at the general hospital, and her mother Susan Basler also attended the event. “When I was expecting her, I was praying that I would be able to come into the new hospital,” said Basler. “As it turned out, I had her right on time.”

Battle is very proud to be a part of Henry Mayo’s history, and loves seeing the community come together. Ever since she was a toddler, she’s been invited to different events and celebrations over the years. A photo of her as a toddler resides inside a Henry Mayo hall.

If residents would like to see the new tower, Henry Mayo will be hosting an open house from 10 a.m. to noon on Saturday. In addition to guided tours of the tower, there will be free food and giveaways available. RSVP at henrymayo.com/openhouse or by calling 661-200-1310.



Dan Watson/The Signal

Henry Mayo Newhall Hospital President and CEO Roger Seaver, left, is joined by Craig Peters, Judy Fish, Marlee Lauffer, Don Kimball and Dr. Don Nishiguchi as they cut the ribbon at the unveiling ceremony for the new Henry Mayo Newhall Hospital Patient Tower in Valencia on Thursday.



Dan Watson/The Signal

Seaver speaks before the ribbon cutting at the ceremony for the new Henry Mayo Newhall Hospital Patient Tower in Valencia on Thursday.

American Beauty Trestles development

It started as one of those winter storm stories in which a hilltop homeowner reports some cracking and slippage in a rain-soaked back yard. It grew into an evolving story of two neighborhoods being

brought together — literally — by the soil that was failing beneath them.

As the slope separating a portion of an American Beauty tract from the Trestles development below

continued to fail, the city, two homeowners associations, residents and the developers worked together to stop the slide — and figure out what to do next.

City tags homes due to shifting land

By **Brennon Dixon**
Signal Staff Writer

(Feb. 23, 2019) City inspectors yellow-tagged the homes of multiple Santa Clarita Valley residents Friday as shifting land on a hill near the 1900 block of Terri Drive continued to sink and forced the voluntary evacuation of multiple homeowners.

When Stephanie and Luis Estrada bought their home last September, the couple never imagined they'd have an experience like the one this week brought.

The gas to the Estrada family's home has been shut off, but the water from the underground pipes still drips onto soil that is now 2 to 5 feet below its original placement level.

Tree roots and tubing are visible across neighbors' yards, and the Trestles — a development of single-family homes that lay below the sinking slope — are facing the threat of debris and mud entering boarded-up windows.

The threat of danger was so real for some families that a city inspector was in the area Friday informing residents that their home had been yellow-tagged, meaning there will be restricted access to the homes.

Some backyard crevices go as deep as 5 feet from the original leveling of the grass, and the brick wall lining the back of the Estrada house has split into multiple pieces and toppled over in some areas.

The backyard fencing that separated the yards of the Williams Homes developments below have also shifted. The concrete keeping the fencing in place breached the ground and hung above the heads of landscapers, who hurriedly filled sandbags Friday afternoon.

Some baseboards and a few walls on the inside of an impacted house have started to split, according to resident Stephanie Estrada, who was outside viewing the damage as her neighbors returned from their camping trip to the sight of a fallen fence and sinking lemon tree.

Amy Ambrose, earth services division president of Landscape Development, was one of the first to arrive on the scene when news of the unstable slope spread on Wednesday.

Ambrose said Friday that it's easy to tell the difference between Wednesday's yard level and Friday's, adding, "It's staggering."

"The houses haven't moved," City Engineer Mike Hennawy said, but the yellow-tag designation will remain in place until a soil engineer determines that it's safe or until the slope is repaired.



Signal File Photo

Homeowners examine the damage to their backyards Friday, which was caused by shifting land. City officials yellow-tagged the homes, and various homes were evacuated from the area.

"The slopes are privately owned and maintained," Hennawy said, so the homeowners associations are responsible for hiring a consultant who will make recommendations on how to best go about a repair.

As for a potential time frame for when the situation will be resolved, Hennawy said, "We leave that to the experts who monitor and test the situation."

"It's subject to confirmation, but at this point it appears the tract of the American Beauty homes has failed and slid onto the Trestles track," said Rick Patterson, an attorney who has had previous experience some of the area's unstable slopes. "I have had conversations with Lance Williams (President of Williams Homes) and he's supporting the HOAs in moving forward."

Williams did not respond to a request for an interview Friday, but Patterson

said he believes the "relatively small" landslide occurred as a result of the recent rainfall.

"The three homes in American Beauty are impacted as a result of the actual separation of the land," Patterson said, "and the Trestles homes are impacted by the dirt that then came down."

"This is a relatively small slide," Patterson said, mentioning other slope failures that have occurred in the area.

"Geologists were on site immediately. They've been on the job, and they know what needs to be done," he said, adding, "There will be soil engineers who will determine the breadth and depth of the slope before they remove the dirt, back-fill it and reinforce it per current codes."

If everybody cooperates, then two months' time would be the best-case scenario for a solution, Patterson said, citing two to four weeks of soil boring and

another 30 days for contractor repairs.

Ambrose said it's anybody's guess how long it'll take, but Landscape Development Inc. will continue working to remediate the situation through the use of different methods.

"The work that's being done now is very superficial," but it's necessary if anybody hopes to keep the slope from sliding further, Ambrose said. "Measures will be taken on multiple houses stretching along the slope because it's better to err on the side of caution."

Residents in both neighborhoods said they haven't heard much from city officials or their homeowners association, and it's yet to be determined who is at fault for the sliding slope that has caused a majority of the residents' problems.

Patterson said, "That'll come out in the engineer's reports, studies and assessments."

Williams issues statement on landslide

By **Signal Staff**

(March 30, 2019) Lance Williams, president and CEO of Williams Homes, confirmed Friday he intends to buy back some of the Trestles homes currently afflicted by a local landslide.

"Williams Homes is a 20-year-old, family-owned company headquartered in the Santa Clarita Valley," Williams said in a prepared statement Friday, adding, "Our company is cooperating with the affected parties associated with the slope failure between the American Beauty and Trestles neighborhoods."

"Our team is further coordinating with a skilled team of soils engineers and geologists working on the site to identify the cause of the failure, develop a work plan to repair the slope, and ultimately complete repairs in a timely fashion so that the affected homes are returned to normal occupancy, and the affected families can safely return to their homes," the CEO said. "We have reached out to the homeowners who have limited access to their homes to provide assistance. We are listening and responding."

"Some affected homeowners have asked us to purchase their homes, which we have agreed to do," Williams said. "We intend to continue our efforts to listen, learn and to provide assistance to the affected families where and when possible."

On-scene update

The failing slope was first noticed by residents living above the Trestles



Signal File Photo

Black fencing presses against the back of a Trestles neighborhood home, pushed out of place by moving earth during the slope failure between Trestles and the American Beauty neighborhood.

developments more than a month ago, when Stephanie and Luis Estrada entered their backyard to find rifts in their brick planters and grass.

Within a week, the cracks morphed into an 8-foot-deep hole that engulfed three backyards — and on Thursday, the damage appeared as if it has continued to get worse.

Workers on the scene can now walk

from the Estradas' backyard down to the Trestles residences unimpeded, since a brick wall that separated the neighborhoods now lays crumbled into multiple pieces.

The black backyard fencing, which hung above workers' heads when the slide originally started, is now pressing into the boarded windows and doors of one of the Trestles homes that Williams

intends to purchase. The backyard fencing and concrete of other homes have also begun splitting due to the pressure of the moving earth.

Piping from the pumps, which were used to mitigate potential damage during previous days of rain, visibly snakes throughout much of the hill alongside bags of gravel.

There has been no heavy rain for at least a week, but puddles are still visible at the base of the landslide — despite the fact that workers used more than 40,000 square feet of plastic sheeting to prevent moisture from reaching the saturated soil.

The gashes that cut through different areas of the slope mirror those found in the Estradas' backyard nearly five weeks ago, except the ones on the hill are 6 feet wide and a couple of feet deep.

Landscape Development Inc. workers were on the scene Thursday working to remove the tarp in an effort to provide access to the geologists and testing teams, according to Amy Ambrose, an earth services division president of Landscape Development, which has been hired to help mitigate the damage done by the slide and recent storms.

Ambrose added in a phone call Friday that a team will return to the slope if there is a chance of rain in the forecast, "but it's out of our hands for now."

Visit signalsev.com/2019/03/landslide to view additional pictures of the failing slope and affected homes.

Homelessness in the SCV

Homelessness is a front-burner issue for Southern California, and the Santa Clarita Valley is no exception. Local activists, nonprofit organizations, and city and county leaders worked together in 2019 to address the impacts of homelessness and to provide services and shelter to help people find their way out of homelessness in the SCV.

Significant developments on the issue in 2019 included the transformation of the Bridge to Home shelter from a part-time, seasonal operation to a 24/7, 365-day-per-year shelter.

Also, the impacts of housing availability and the potential for new homeless populations were exemplified by the story of the Cali Lake RV resort in Soledad Canyon, where local government officials and the property owner worked together to address permitting issues that, had they not been resolved, would have forced multiple residents into homelessness.

Bridge to Home receives \$840K

By Tammy Murga
Signal Staff Writer

The Santa Clarita Valley’s only homeless shelter, run by the nonprofit Bridge to Home, announced Friday it secured \$840,000 in year-round funding for 60 beds and 24-hour services starting this fall.

By Sept. 15, individuals experiencing homelessness across the Santa Clarita Valley will have access to shelter and resources at any hour, 365 days a year at the area’s primary homeless services provider.

The move comes about seven months after officials found out a grant that would have provided for year-round shelter operations had been canceled.

The new funds are a result of an RFP, or request for proposal, for year-round operations submitted in December through the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, a joint powers authority between the county and city of L.A. that financially supports agencies like Bridge to Home, said Mike Foley, executive director of the nonprofit.

The application came after a former grant process to receive nearly \$1 million was canceled due to insufficient Measure H funds that other homeless housing projects around the L.A. County area were competing for, according to Tom Waldman, director of communications with LAHSA.

As a result, the Newhall-based provider lacked the funds necessary to transition from an emergency shelter to a year-round



(Left) The Santa Clarita homeless task force is made up of stakeholders from multiple local organizations in education, health care, law enforcement and faith. (Right) Bridge to Home Shelter donations come from families, churches, Scouts and businesses. Helping set up the sleeping quarters with blankets and towels are volunteers Haley, left, and Riley, center, Cabot and Resident Attendant Jayne Patafio, right.



facility. However, funding support from L.A. County 5th District Supervisor Kathryn Barger, the city of Santa Clarita and donations from community partners has managed to keep doors open for the shelter’s longest operating season yet. In years past, the shelter traditionally opened around the week before Thanksgiving and operated until the end of winter.

The donations this past year have helped the organization stay open past the winter season and offer 45 beds to individuals. While the shelter is open at the moment, shelter officials have asked the community for donations to keep it open

until September, when the new funds take effect.

“When we got the word that the RFP was delayed, that took everybody by surprise, but I think the community was able to come together and provide enough gap funding to keep it open until today with new funding,” said Mayor Pro Tem Cameron Smyth, who is the chairman of the Santa Clarita Homeless Task Force.

While Bridge to Home secured thousands in year-round funding, the contract covers only 75% of its expanded operations, said Foley. There is an immediate need for \$100,000 now and an additional

\$150,000 for the upcoming months, for a total of \$250,000 by Sept. 30.

The nonprofit has launched a fundraising campaign to fill this gap, and those interested in helping can donate in many ways. To find out how, you can visit bto-home.org.

“These funds, awarded by LAHSA, are the boost we needed,” Foley said in a prepared statement. “I urge all of you, whether you are long-term supporter or looking to give back to your community, to consider donating to Bridge to Home. Your support will make an enormous difference in the lives of our most vulnerable neighbors.”

Homeless task force looks back at 2019

By Tammy Murga
Signal Staff Writer

(Dec. 19, 2019) Formed just more than a year ago, a collaborative community task force leading the Santa Clarita Homelessness Plan met for the last time in 2019 on Wednesday to wrap up the year as it prepares for the new homeless count in 2020.

“2019 was a pretty good start but we still have more work to do,” said Mayor Cameron Smyth, who serves as the task force’s chairman. “We had to do a lot of organizational, administrative meetings to get the structure in place but once we did that, I think we made a lot of progress.”

The 2020 PIT count

Santa Clarita’s 2019 point-in-time count tallied 256 people facing homelessness. The figure increased from the 156 counted last year, but it was still inaccurate, according to the task force.

Now at the table with more than 30 stakeholders, the task force has a better idea of how many people are facing homelessness in Santa Clarita, said Smyth.

“We always knew that the ‘official’ count really isn’t accurate and through our partnership with the school districts

and organizations here, I think we have a much better handle of what that number is and what that picture looks like,” he said. “I think that’s been very helpful and will enable us to be more productive in 2020 in learning what their needs are and how we can better connect them to resources.”

With the help of five UCLA graduate students, who gave recommendations in May on how to improve the local count, the task force established planned actions to implement in the 2020 count. Some implementations include improved volunteer training and establishing teams with a minimum of three people serving as a navigator, driver and recorder, as well as establishing an experienced team leader.

In future counts, the task force is looking to implement walking in areas that cannot be adequately seen from a car, as well as conducting the count during the daytime hours rather than nighttime, as currently required by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority.

Homelessness in SCV schools

The education-focused sector of the task force made big strides this year through multiple strategies, including the implementation of a nighttime student residency questionnaire across all

Santa Clarita Valley school districts.

The system helped identify 101 more homeless students in the Newhall School District, bringing the latest count to 138, according to Jeff Pelzel, superintendent of the Newhall district.

The Newhall School District established family resource centers at Wiley Canyon and McGrath schools to help families with clothing, school supplies and food. FeedSCV has provided homeless students backpacks filled with food and snacks for the weekend.

The William S. Hart Union High School District has expanded its number of social workers from five to eight across the district and College of the Canyons is applying for a grant of anywhere between \$500,000 to \$700,000 from the state for rapid rehousing services to help homeless students.

Next year, the task force plans on working with the city to potentially offer bus passes for homeless families and students.

Growing the team, services

The 30-plus member task force grew by an additional member in August with the addition of Gabriela Martinez, the city of Santa Clarita’s first homeless coordinator. Her position is funded

through a \$75,000 grant that is part of the \$375,000 the city received from the nearly \$3.8 million in Measure H funding for homeless programs.

She has since met with multiple organizations from in and around the SCV, including with Los Angeles County officials, seeking include the SCV in the LA-Homeless Outreach Portal, a new online portal designed to make it easier for vulnerable residents to request help and connect with local resources.

In September, SCV’s only homeless shelter, Bridge to Home, claimed victory when it switched from a seasonal facility to operating 24 hours, 365 days a year after securing \$840,000 in year-round funding.

Starting in 2020, the task force agreed to review its strategic plan and continue its efforts despite a recent Supreme Court decision to not review a lower court’s ruling allowing the homeless to sleep on streets without punishment, said Smyth.

“Regardless of what the ruling was going to be, we’re moving forward with our plan like we always do in Santa Clarita and we’re going to do it the best way we know how to serve the members of our community.”

The Task Force is scheduled to reconvene in January.

Thank You from The Signal

We aren’t listing this as one of the top stories of the year, but it bears noting that 2019 was the 100th anniversary of The Signal. Through the year we’ve looked back at the newspaper’s first 100 years and its enduring relationship with the community.

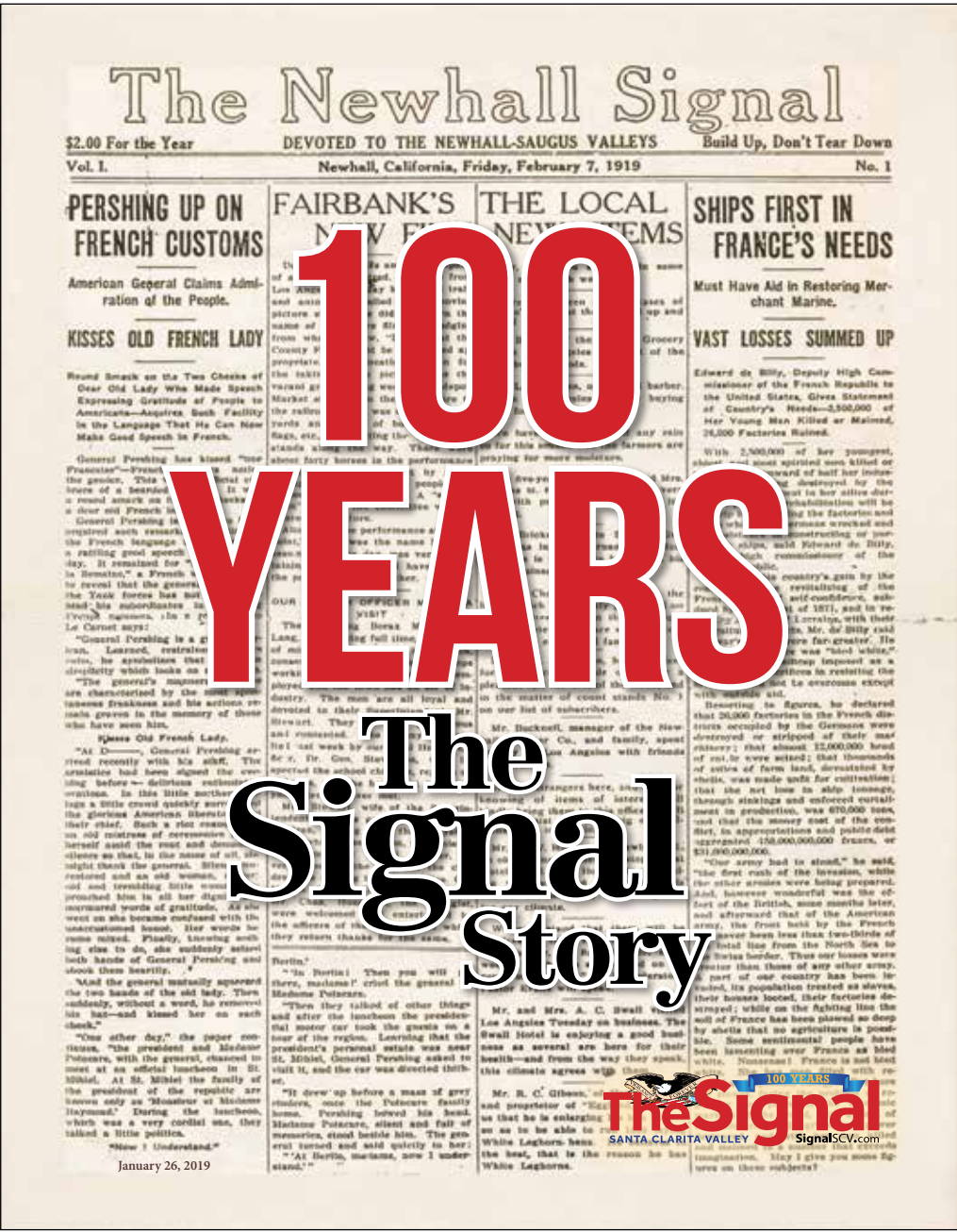
The Signal was founded as a small-town weekly on Feb. 7, 1919, at a time when cows outnumbered people in the Santa Clarita Valley and just 500 people called this valley home.

The newspaper grew with the community in the ensuing decades, eventually becoming a multimedia daily news operation serving a community of several hundred thousand people.

We are extremely proud of the 100-year connection between The Signal and the SCV, and the work our team has done every day in 2019 to bring you the news of our valley, from tragedies to human drama to local government and the triumphs of our fellow SCV citizens.

We thank the community for supporting The Signal through its first 100 years, and we begin our “second century” with optimism — and not only a continued pledge to remain Vigilant Forever as we cover the hometown news, but also to maintain an abiding commitment to advocate for the best interests of our community.

— The Signal Editorial Board



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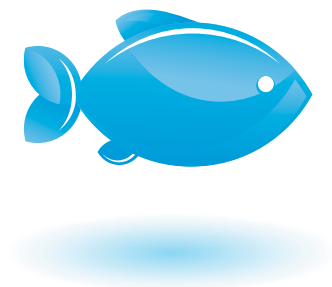


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The Tick Fire



Cory Rubin/The Signal

A Los Angeles County firefighter walks past a wall of fire at the Tick Fire in Canyon Country.

TICK

Continued from S9

College of the Canyons a short time later. Deputies with the Santa Clarita Valley Sheriff’s Station carried out more evacuations on additional local

streets, said Shirley Miller, spokeswoman for the SCV Sheriff’s Station. Evacuations on the following streets were underway, she said. They include:

- North and east of Plum Canyon Road.
- North and east of Whites Canyon Road.

- North and east of Soledad Canyon Road, north of Highway 14, west of Sequoia Road
- Davenport Road, east of Sierra Highway and including all streets off of Davenport Road.

By 5 p.m., fire officials had opened up a second evacuation center at the

Newhall Community Center. Displaced residents are urged to go there or to COC in Valencia.

With regards to livestock, arrangements have been made to have large animals and livestock taken to Pierce College, 6201 Winnetka Ave., in Woodland Hills.

Losing El Rancho

Family affected by Tick Fire tells of their loss

By Tammy Murga
Signal Staff Writer

Against the flying embers possessed by vicious wind gusts and dark charcoal smoke from the Tick Fire, Canyon Country resident and handyman Eliseo Bugarin knew he just had to try.

He was close, but it was far too late when visibility became nearly nonexistent.

“I was going to the house to try and save it,” Bugarin said Wednesday, alternately speaking in English and Spanish. “I was so close to arriving but I couldn’t go farther because of the smoke; it was too large and too black. When I turned around, I could see flames on my truck. I just drove away knowing we lost the entire house.”

It wasn’t just any house to the Bugarin family of six that the Tick Fire, which grew to 4,615 acres since Oct. 24 and was declared 100% contained on Thursday by fire officials, consumed entirely. It was their getaway destination, a safe haven away from work, stress and the daily routine.

To them, it was “El Rancho,” or “the ranch” house in Spanish.

“We have almost like a 360-degree view of Canyon Country and the (Santa Clarita) Valley,” said Carolina Bugarin, Eliseo’s wife. “It was our weekend home and the place where the kids could enjoy nature and play with the goats, horses, the dogs and pigs.”

The home, which stood high on the hillsides of Tick Canyon Road and was owned by the family for 12 years, was a dream house in the making as Eliseo spent an average of four to five hours daily caring for the property.

“Between his work, he would stop

by and plant palm trees and plants, take care of the animals, and make a (horse) corral,” said Carolina. “We were getting antique stuff to match the ranch theme. We spent our birthdays there, had family get-togethers. What we were building was our retirement home.”

All memories now

But it’s all memories now, she added. All of their belongings, including some of their farm animals, surrendered to the fire.

The property sat inside a brush clearance zone but the embers that “flew so crazy onto the house is what burned it down,” said Carolina.

“Our house wasn’t too big but, you know, everything costs hard work in life and to own,” said Eliseo.

The father of four, who migrated to the United States from Mexico at age 17, had dreams to open a business and own a home. And he did. After meeting Carolina 20 years ago, he bought a house in Sun Valley, with a plan later to rent the property and eventually retire in El Rancho with his family.

“We’re OK but not emotionally,” said Carolina, a stay-at-home mom. “The thought of him losing all that he worked hard for is the hardest because buying a home like the one he grew up in was his goal. He enjoys the farm life. We planned to retire there but it’s not going to happen anymore.”

Despite their loss, “life keeps going. It’s about trying one more time,” said Eliseo, who nearly broke down in tears.

The family currently resides in their Sun Valley home as they start the recovery process.

On Wednesday, the couple visited the temporary local assistance center where they sought property tax relief



Photo courtesy of the Bugarin family

Canyon Country resident Eliseo Bugarin looks over the remains of his 12-year home after the Tick Fire raged through the property.

through the Los Angeles County’s Office of the Assessor, as well as help from the Red Cross.

At least four other families whose homes were declared destroyed during the Tick Fire received assistance at

the center, to which Assessor’s Office spokesman Stephen Whitmore reminded others affected by the blaze to stop by as operations will continue through Monday, Nov. 4 from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. at 20880 Centre Pointe Parkway.

Evacuee: ‘Once we saw the flames, we said, “We can’t do this”’

By Jim Holt
Signal Senior Staff Writer

From Shadow Pines where the Tick Fire first hit, to Val Verde at the end of the day where it is believed to have extended, SCV residents were shocked to witness the fierceness of Thursday’s fire.

Shadow Pines

Pam Conley watched a wall of flame sweep across Tick Canyon toward her house near Shadow Pines.

“Flames, flames; it was horrible,” she said.

Conley and her daughter, one of several families who live on Park Glen, a cul-de-sac, were evacuated by fire officials with the Los Angeles County Fire Department.

“We started putting all our (most important) items in our vehicle about 40 minutes before we left,” she said. “Once we saw the flames we said, ‘We can’t do this’ and we left.”

“They have everything blocked off,” Conley said. “You can’t get in, you can

only get out.”

Conley, who lives at the top of a hill on the cul-de-sac, said she saw what looked like all the residents of her street leaving, as well.

As she drove away from the advancing fire and from her home, she saw firefighters “going up and down the streets” near Shadow Pines, telling people to leave.

Conley drove to the Golden Valley area and watched the flames from there as a dark spreading cloud of smoke covered the northeast section of the SCV.

Mint Canyon

Before long, the Tick Fire had crested the hills to the east of Sierra Highway, leaving the communities and businesses below no other choice but to pack their bags as quickly as they could, grabbing people, pets and papers, and leave their homes behind.

As deputies shouted out over the vehicles’ loudspeakers in the Mint Canyon neighborhood that “we’re on our own,” residents began prepping for their imminent departure.

“Yes, we’re kind of worried because it’s

just behind the mountains there,” said Mint Canyon resident Subashini Subramanian. “Just now, my husband left work and went to my daughter’s high school to pick her up.”

Mint Canyon resident Trevor Jones, 25, was spotted preparing for the blaze by spraying the grass and homes with hose water. He continued to do so as the fire raced down toward his and his neighbors’ homes while his mother, Heather Tredick, worked to pack up the house.

Tredick said going through her head was “basically the same thing and everyone else who has gone through this: ‘Oh my gosh, I’m going to lose everything.’ I’m terrified, it’s terrifying. We used to see fires everywhere, but when it’s this close to you, you gain a different perspective.”

After speaking with a Signal reporter on the scene, Tredick picked up what would become an emotional phone call with her husband, as she was informing him that they were being evacuated.

Some Canyon Country residents came to the Mint Canyon area to see the fire for

themselves and determine if they should evacuate themselves.

“It doesn’t worry me because the Santa Clarita (firefighters) are always on it,” said Casey Henry, a Sand Canyon resident. “I’ve got that safety net.”

Val Verde

Residents from Val Verde, with the Rye Fire still fresh in their memory, said they had a scare of their own when they saw the smoke of a blaze not far from their homes.

“I heard planes flying by, and I came outside and just saw the smoke,” said Mario, a Val Verde resident. “We haven’t gotten a fire in a long time.”

“As I was walking up I saw the fire,” said Robert Avalos, the owner of a trailer that burned. “I saw the black smoke.”

Avalos said he wasn’t certain if the fire was an accident or on purpose. What he says he does know is that he lost \$4,000 worth of materials in a trailer and pickup truck.

“I’m not homeless, but I’m going to go look for the guy who burned it,” said Avalos.

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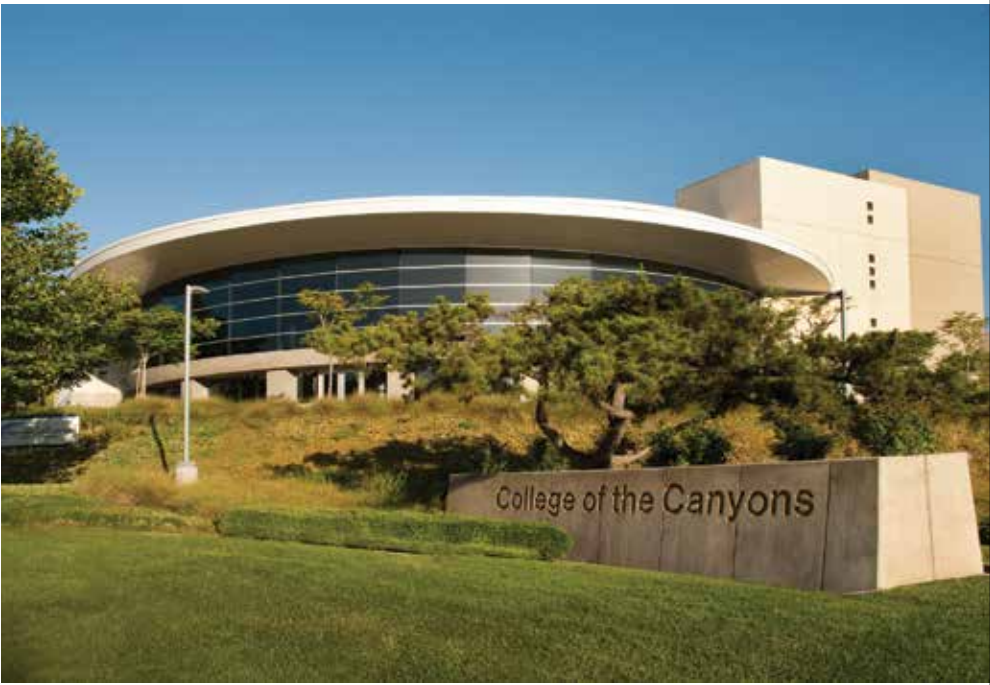
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