

Sun

AT THE MOVIES



Tiger King: See it to believe it [18]



A necessity

Agricultural laborers are exempted from the state's stay-at-home order, but questions about how to keep them safe remain [8]
BY MALEA MARTIN

NEWS The financial reality of COVID-19 hits cities, county [9]

ARTS Stay sane with the Wildling Museum's hashtag [14]

EATS Buy local produce, support local farms [20]

To our loyal readers,

We want to update you on the *New Times*' and the *Sun*'s plans for COVID-19 (coronavirus). We also want to address any questions you may have regarding our operations, delivery options, and more.

First and foremost, our hearts go out to those in our community and beyond who have been impacted by the virus. The health and well-being of our community is of great importance and we will continually review and update our actions in accordance with new information from the CDC and local authorities.

It is times like these where we feel grateful for our family of clients and readers, and we cannot thank you enough for your continued loyalty. From our family to yours, we wish for the best in these challenging times and for the health and well-being of our clients, readers, and community. We're grateful for the decades of fun and information *New Times* has brought to our lives and know this challenging time is just a bump in the road.

We're also here for you to tell the stories from our community. Please feel free to share any local notable news, ideas, stories, events, images, or positive actions deriving from our current nationwide crisis. You can send them slothevirus@newtimeslo.com.

We are committed to continue providing weekly coverage of Northern Santa Barbara County. Yet, our offices will be closed to the general public.

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For all other inquiries, please call 805-347-1968 and you will be directed to the appropriate department.

We will continue to publish our newspaper as usual and are committed to keeping the public informed. We appreciate your understanding and wish you all good health.

Thank you so much,
New Times Media Group Staff



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Santa Maria Valley growers who faced a labor shortage before the COVID-19 pandemic now deal with even more uncertainty. On March 20, the government halted visa applications. However, guest workers can apply for temporary work visas through the H-2A program, due to a waiver authorized on March 26. How to keep those workers safe and informed both in the field and in their employer-provided housing is the next hurdle. Staff Writer Malea Martin gets the lowdown from ag industry stakeholders and workers rights advocates [8].



NECESSARY WORK: Although the H-2A program was temporarily in flux due to coronavirus concerns, the biggest concern now is how temporary guest workers will stay safe as they work during the pandemic.

Also this week, read about the financial issues cities and the county are facing as tax revenue dries up [9], a moment of Zen with the Wildling Museum [14], a novel on wheels in this stationary time [16], and the local farms you can support and get fresh produce from during the pandemic [20].

Camillia Lanham
editor

Cover photo by Dylan Honea-Baumann > Cover design by Alex Zuniga

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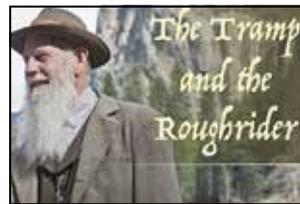
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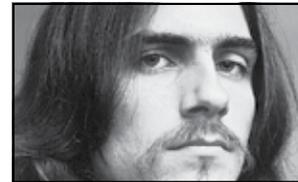
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Sinsheimer Stadium



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San Luis Obispo Blues Baseball



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Madonna Inn
Meadows



**SLO Blues vs.
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Political Watch

• On March 27, **Gov. Gavin Newsom** issued an executive order prohibiting evictions for residential renters who are unable to pay rent due to a loss of wages or additional expenses because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The order stipulates that tenants are required to inform their landlord in writing at least no more than seven days after rent is due, that they're unable to pay all or part of the rent. The order is not a rent freeze. Tenants are required to repay rent they owe after the moratorium is lifted on May 31. This order follows a previous executive order the governor issued on March 16 that made it easier for local governments to pass their own eviction moratoriums. "People shouldn't lose or be forced out of their homes because of the spread of COVID-19," Newsom said in a news release on March 16. "Over the next few weeks, everyone will have to make sacrifices, but a place to live shouldn't be one of them." Following this initial executive order, Santa Barbara County passed its eviction moratorium on March 24.

• In a statement his office released on March 27, **U.S. Rep. Salud Carbajal** (D-Santa Barbara) applauded Congress for passing the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, which includes direct payments to assist many Americans and extended unemployment benefits. "On California's Central Coast, I've been speaking with workers, families, small business owners, health professionals and more, and I've been relaying our community's concerns back to Washington as we work to provide aid," Carbajal said in the statement. "I'm proud to see some of our community's requests in this package—including increased unemployment benefits, more relief for small businesses, hospital and health system investments, support for our agriculture industry, and student loan assistance." The legislation includes direct payments of \$1,200 for most adults who make under \$75,000 annually—at which point the payment reduces—and \$500 for children 16 years old and younger. According to a press release from **U.S. Sen. Diane Feinstein's** (D-California) office, anyone who filed a tax return for 2018 or 2019 doesn't need to do anything to receive the funds. Those who didn't file a return for those years should file a return for 2019 now, and when filing, sign up for direct deposit to receive recovery payments as quickly as possible, Feinstein said in the release. Filing a tax return is the only way to receive the funds. In a statement about the legislation, **Gov. Gavin Newsom** said the act also provides an additional \$600 a week for many Californians who have filed for unemployment. "State and local governments will need additional and flexible funding to ensure they can continue responding to this crisis and continue critical services," Newsom said. "California businesses and residents will also need additional federal support to weather this economic storm."

• The **Santa Barbara County Association of Governments** (SBCAG) announced on March 27 that it has received nearly \$108 million from the **California Transportation Commission** for road projects. "We are very grateful to receive this funding from the California Transportation Commission," SCBAG Board of Directors Chair and **2nd District Santa Barbara County Supervisor Gregg Hart** said in a news release. "Now, more than ever, as we are faced with impacts on health and the economy as a result of COVID-19, we recognize the critical role transportation projects will provide in creating jobs and in helping to foster economic growth." Nearly all of the funding will go toward Highway 101 improvements in Carpinteria. The remaining money will be spent on smaller projects, including bike paths and coastal access improvements in South County. ☉



WITHIN THEIR POWER: Local organizations are calling for the Santa Maria City Council to pass policies that will help local renters, but the council's jurisdiction has limits.

Local organizations call on Santa Maria to pass eviction moratorium policies

A group of local organizations is calling on Santa Maria City Council members to pass policies that would make it easier for people who are struggling to pay rent as a result of COVID-19—but the limitations of the city's jurisdiction might present hurdles to their demands.

Angel Lopez, a youth organizer with Future Leaders of America, started a change.org petition urging the council "to follow the lead of many other neighboring cities and take action in protecting our tenants and small business from evictions and foreclosures." He also told the *Sun* that his organization is "asking our students to share their stories on how COVID has affected them" with the City Council.

Initially, the petition asked that Santa Maria freeze all evictions in light of Gov. Gavin Newsom's March 16 executive order allowing local governments to halt evictions for renters. But after Newsom issued a statewide moratorium on evictions on March 27, the demands from local organizations shifted to reflect the governor's most recent orders.

According to Abraham Melendrez, a policy advocate with Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE), the governor's order does not actually halt eviction notices—instead, it simply kicks the can down the road.

"The landlords are still able to serve an eviction notice, but what the governor has done has basically delayed the local sheriffs or other kinds of enforcement agencies from actually enforcing those evictions," Melendrez told the *Sun*. "A big issue that could end up happening is that once the order expires on May 31, then a bunch of people will eventually still have to respond to those evictions and will potentially be homeless right after."

For this reason, CAUSE and partnering organizations are calling for Santa Maria to pass policies that would make things easier for those struggling to pay rents as a result of COVID-19.

"We've compiled a lot of the policies that other cities have passed," Melendrez said. "A lot of times people

have to provide a notice to their landlord that they're not able to pay their rent. The governor's order gives renters seven days after the rent is due. We're asking for a 30-day period and to include text messaging in those official written communications."

He said that including text messaging as a part of official written communications would make it easier for renters to communicate with their landlords. Other asks include giving renters six months to pay back their missed rent once the statewide moratorium has concluded, an idea that Santa Barbara's City Council mulled over at its March 24 meeting. Organizations are also asking to stop late fees and consider relief for small businesses.

The difficulty that the council may run into is whether it is within the city's legal right to act on preventing evictions. City Attorney Thomas Watson told the *Sun* that the only government organization that has any authority over evictions is the Superior Court.

"In order to affect an eviction ... the landlord files an action in the Superior Court, the Superior Court issues a writ of possession, the landlord then gets the sheriff's office to come and have that person removed from the property," Watson said. "That's why cities, while they can make statements of policy, have no legal authority to prevent an eviction."

Councilmember Mike Cordero said that he would be willing to take on anything that falls within the city's jurisdiction.

"If anything was brought before the city that we have a legal right or responsibility to deal with, then I would take that on," he said. "But on the other hand, if something does not fall within the responsibilities of the City Council, I would refer that to the city attorney or to the proper agency of jurisdiction."

Councilmember Gloria Soto told the *Sun* that she believes City Council can help renters—who make up more than half of Santa Maria's residents—by making these supportive statements of policy that Watson referenced.

"Even though the state governor has put in place this new order, it's still important

for local jurisdictions, for municipalities, for counties to show support of it in order to be able to protect tenants across the state of California," Soto said. "My understanding is that it's going to be really challenging for the state to be able to enforce this order."

In Oakland, the City Council was able to get the Superior Court to halt court proceedings by sending a letter demanding that they pause evictions.

"That's where these local jurisdictions need to come into play, including the city of Santa Maria," Soto said. "This is where we need to stand up and say, 'Yes we are in support of this order and we're going to do our part in protecting tenants.'"

—Malea Martin

NEWS continued page 6

Weekend Weather

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Microclimate Weather Forecast
Dave Hovde
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Thursday



COASTAL > High 66 Low 44
INLAND > High 70 Low 42

Friday



COASTAL > High 66 Low 45
INLAND > High 71 Low 38

Saturday



COASTAL > High 64 Low 47
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NEWS from page 4

Residents near Lompoc continue fight against wind project

Not wanting their home to be disturbed by the nearby development of 29 wind turbines in a largely undeveloped area about 5 miles south of Lompoc, George and Cheryl Bedford continue their fight against the project.

The couple, who live on a ridgetop near the project's location in San Miguelito Canyon, appealed the Santa Barbara County Planning Commission's approval of the project in November to the county Board of Supervisors. The latter rejected these appeals and approved the project during a meeting in late January.

On Feb. 21, the Bedfords filed a lawsuit challenging the board's decision to approve a permit for the project. The couple also appealed the county's Central Board of Architectural Review's (CBAR) approval of the preliminary design of the project. This started another appeal process that sent the project back to the Planning Commission, and then again to the Board of Supervisors.

In this second appeal over the design of the project at the board's March 31 meeting, Richard Adam, an attorney representing the Bedfords, claimed that CBAR and the Planning Commission approved this project despite language in the county's Land Use and Development Code that requires projects to match their surrounding areas. Based on this language, he said, the nearly 500-foot tall wind turbines don't fit in a rural area such as San Miguelito Canyon.

"In order to approve a project, any project, a finding has to be made that the overall structure ... as well as any part of any structure ... are in proportion to and in scale with other existing or permitted structures in the area surrounding the subject property," Adam said.

In a presentation to the board prior to Adam's comments, county Planner Kathy Pfeifer said that CBAR and the Planning Commission approved the project while recognizing that the height, scale, location, and design of the wind turbines can't be changed because of technical requirements.

"The [Planning Commission's] motion to grant preliminary design approval was for the project as a whole, while acknowledging some components of the project have technical constraints that may limit design compatibility with the surrounding environment," Pfeifer said.

The board—absent 4th District Supervisor Peter Adam, who recused himself because the Bedfords' attorney is his brother—unanimously rejected the appeal and approved moving the project forward.

"I understand the argument," 5th District Supervisor Steve Lavagnino said. "I think staff answered it correctly and well, and it's probably not the last we're going to hear about this."

In a previous interview with the *Sun*, Daniel Duke, vice president of development for BayWa—the company behind the wind farm—said construction of the project is slated to be complete by the end of this year. Once complete, the wind turbines would produce about 98 megawatts of electricity annually, which is enough to power roughly 43,000 homes.

—Zac Ezzone

Santa Barbara County firefighters released from quarantine after negative COVID-19 test

Four Santa Barbara County firefighters who were quarantined after a potential exposure to COVID-19 while responding to a call on March 24 were released from isolation, SBC Fire Department Public Information Officer Daniel Bertucelli told the *Sun*. Dr. Henning Ansong, Santa Barbara County public health officer, confirmed in a March 30 teleconference that the

patient the firefighters came into contact with tested negative for the virus.

"They've been cleared and they've been sent out," Bertucelli said. "They were quarantined at an off-site location."

Bertucelli said that the fire department is taking extra precautions to minimize exposure when responding to calls.

"We're having one firefighter on the crew go in and make the initial contact with the patient and make that determination if more people need to go in to assist," he said.

Because the March 24 response involved an outdoor medical emergency, all responders made patient contact and had to be quarantined. Bertucelli said that as of March 30, there were no additional exposures or quarantined firefighters to report.

To protect first responders, the fire department is ensuring that their firefighters are wearing full personal protective equipment (PPE) on every call, which includes gowns, masks, goggles, and gloves. Some PPE is also placed on the patients to reduce the possibility of transmission.

"We're immediately placing a mask on the patient and we're maintaining our 6-foot distances whenever possible," Bertucelli said. "A lot of the questioning portion of our job, when we're asking people what's wrong, can be done from a distance."

Amid local and nationwide concerns over shortages on essential PPE such as N95 masks, Bertucelli said the fire department is keeping up its supply so far.

"Our logistics section is working very hard in trying to ensure that we're maintaining our supply of PPE, but it's definitely difficult to maintain that supply," he said. "We're working hard to maintain it, as of now it is currently maintained, and we'll see what happens in the future."

In the March 30 Santa Barbara County teleconference, 2nd District Supervisor Gregg Hart said that the county is "continuing aggressively to get in line with the state's allocations of that equipment."

Hart also called out local efforts to sew PPE in case supplies get low.

"There are people who are working feverishly at home to sew personal protective equipment that could be used in a supplemental way with the official equipment that is being delivered by the state," he said. "At this point in time we have sufficient supplies, but we are trying to stay ahead of that."

Hart also confirmed that 1 million N95 masks were allocated to Santa Barbara County through the state of California's distribution process.

"Those masks are being allocated through the county's process that has been a collaboration of all of the local health providers," Hart said. "The hospitals, the health clinics have all worked together to create a process whereby those resources are fairly allocated to the different parts of the county and the different medical needs of the county."

As of March 30, Santa Barbara County had 88 confirmed cases of COVID-19, an increase of 20 cases from the last report. Of the 20 new cases, nine reside in Santa Maria, one in Orcutt, six in North County, three in Lompoc, and one in the city of Santa Barbara.

—Malea Martin

Commission recommends more stringent permit process for cannabis cultivation

All cannabis cultivation projects in Santa Barbara County will face a more rigorous permitting process if supervisors back a recommendation the county Planning Commission made at a recent meeting.

Last year, the county Board of Supervisors directed staff to work with the Planning Commission on potential changes to the county's

existing cannabis cultivation ordinances to address issues that have popped up over the roughly two years that the regulations have been in place.

During the commission's fourth meeting on the topic, March 25, it unanimously approved a resolution that recommends all cannabis cultivation projects be required to obtain a conditional use permit. Previously, depending on their locations, many projects only required a land use permit.

One of the more significant differences between the two permit types is that land use permits can be approved by the director of the county's Planning and Development Department, while conditional use permits always go through the commission. Commission Chair Laura Bridley said switching to the latter could actually save time because most projects end up at the commission through the appeal process anyway.

"Applicants are probably spending as much as they would trying to defend [a project] and get through the [land use permit] process," Bridley said. "If it's a [conditional use permit], you know what the process is."

The other, more significant, difference is the amount of discretion the commission has to require specific project criteria through the conditional use permit. The commission has debated in previous meetings what it was and wasn't allowed to require for projects with land use permits.

Although there was unanimous support for this change, the commission spent hours debating whether it should include proposed changes to how cannabis odor is controlled in its resolution to the board. In a previous meeting, the commission asked for the board's input on a potential change that would have required cannabis farmers to prevent odors from leaving their property. But the board didn't respond clearly to this suggestion.

Third District Commissioner John Parke suggested the commission move forward without recommending changes to how the county enforces odor control on projects. Instead, he said, the commission could make those determinations on a case-by-case basis when evaluating each conditional use permit.

"The idea of a [conditional use permit] for all these activities will resolve most of the problems we are having," Parke said. "It will certainly entitle us to impose the conditions that we think are appropriate."

Other commissioners said they didn't believe this single change was enough, given the many hours of public testimony they've heard about odor issues in previous meetings. After a lengthy debate on the issue, the commission agreed to recommending a change to the county's odor control standard that essentially repeats language already outlined in the requirements for conditional use permits.

"We're repeating some language, but we're underlining it at the same time," 1st District Commissioner Michael Cooney said.

Dan Klemann, deputy director of the county's Long Range Planning Division, told the *Sun* that the resolution the commission crafted will be presented to the board at a future hearing for which the date hasn't been determined. From there, supervisors can ask staff to draft ordinance amendment language based on the commission's recommendations.

Klemann said there are still potential ordinance amendments the Planning Commission would like to discuss in the future, but there are no specific plans as to when that'll take place.

—Zac Ezzone

Cities, county weigh tax relief amid COVID-19 pandemic

As many Santa Barbara County residents and businesses take on additional financial burdens related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the county and some local cities are offering some form of temporary tax relief.

During the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors meeting on March 24, county Treasurer-Tax Collector Harry Hagen said the county doesn't have the authority to change the date by which residents must pay property taxes. The payment is due on Feb. 1, and becomes delinquent on April 10 after which the taxpayer incurs a late penalty.

Although only the state can change these dates, Hagen said he is preparing to provide penalty waivers so that people can pay their taxes without incurring a penalty, if they're affected by COVID-19. Hagen told the board that his office is trying to work out a way to create a process by which people can obtain and fill out a penalty waiver application.

"Basically they have to just prove to us that they were affected and signing under penalty of perjury is one method," Hagen told the board. "But we'll try to make it as easy and painless and assist people that may have been affected either because of health, or financial ... There will be a thousand different reasons that people were affected."

With the statewide stay-at-home order still in place quickly reducing the number of people traveling, the cities of Buellton and Lompoc have adopted similar measures to provide some tax relief to local hotels and motels.

In a special meeting on March 27, Lompoc City Council voted to waive penalties and interest for late transient occupancy tax payments for hotels and motels in the city until June 30.

The day prior to Lompoc's vote, the Buellton City Council approved a plan to temporarily defer transient occupancy tax payments for up to 90 days. Under this plan, local hotels and motels must still file these tax returns with the city as usual, but the payment could be delayed.

Buellton City Manager Scott Wolfe told the *Sun* that this item was added to the council's agenda after a few local hotels contacted the city expressing concerns about their inability to cover their upcoming tax payment.

"Our hotels are empty right now; there may be some that have closed," Wolfe said. "We had been contacted by hotels here that expressed concern, and we understand." ☺

—Zac Ezzone

We're still here, albeit a little differently

You've probably noticed the content we've cut from our pages and the thinness of our weekly paper. We've definitely noticed that you, dear readers, aren't out and about like you used to be.

Just like us, you've been forced to make changes to your daily and weekly routines. And although these are temporary and due to the situation we are facing with COVID-19, everybody has to adjust. It's the only way to get through it.

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—Camillia Lanham, editor

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Protecting producers

With tight living spaces and work that's not conducive to social distancing, H-2A farmworkers are at risk

BY MALEA MARTIN

Even before the days of stay-at-home orders and record-breaking numbers of unemployment applications, our nation struggled with domestic labor shortages in the agricultural sector. As American Farm Bureau President Zippy Duvall wrote during 2019's mid-summer harvest season, "Farmers and ranchers in every state tell me that the shortage of labor is the greatest limiting factor on their farms."

According to Claire Wineman, president of the Grower-Shipper Association of Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo Counties, Santa Maria is no exception to this nationwide reality.

"We've had an ongoing labor shortage for many years now, back to 2011 or 2012," Wineman told the *Sun*. "It's been an ongoing problem, and the H-2A guest worker program has helped to alleviate that shortage."

The H-2A program allows growers and farm labor contractors in the U.S. to supplement their domestic workforce with seasonal guest employees. And though the H-2A program isn't new—the program has been around since 1986—Duvall's 2019 piece states that workers hired through the H-2A visa program have more than doubled in the past five years. In short, farms across the nation are relying on H-2A workers more than ever.

But with the U.S. now in the lead with the most confirmed cases of COVID-19 worldwide, growers and farm labor contractors are concerned that the already challenging process for obtaining these visas will now be riddled with barriers.

The first hurdle to the H-2A program came on March 20 when the Department of State temporarily suspended routine visa services at U.S. embassies and consulates, including services for H-2A visas.

Steve Scaroni, founder of labor service provider Fresh Harvest Inc., Scaroni Family of Companies, told the *Sun* that this initial suspension meant big trouble for the farm labor supply, as contractors would only be allowed to bring in workers who had already gone through the interview process and



BUSINESS AS USUAL: Amid a statewide shelter-in-place order, essential workers like those on the H-2A visa program don't have the option to stay home

successfully obtained an H-2A visa in the past.

But on March 26, the Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security decided to authorize temporary waivers for in-person interviews for eligible H-2A applicants, meaning that the H-2A program could continue to operate despite the suspension of visa processing. But Scaroni, whose company contracts H-2A farmers in Santa Maria among other cities, still has his concerns.

"I don't know if it changes the game: It removes one level of complexity," Scaroni said. "This thing is still a chess game every day. ... It's going to make it a little bit easier, but it certainly doesn't make it easy."

One of the remaining complexities is housing. The H-2A program requires that employers provide living spaces to visa recipients, an issue that's sparked past debate in Santa Maria. In April 2019, the Santa Maria City Council voted to require permits for housing more than six H-2A workers in a single-family home. But the ordinance didn't call for any restrictions on medium- and high-density housing zones.

According to Abraham Melendrez, an organizer for the Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE), the way that H-2A workers are housed poses a huge threat to their health amid the spread of the coronavirus.

"We're really concerned, especially given that a lot of them live in bunker-style housing," Melendrez told the *Sun*. "The requirements for

living are very small and oftentimes not adequate. It's really unsafe conditions."

Cynthia Rice, director of Litigation, Advocacy & Training at California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA), also expressed concern over the safety of H-2A housing.

"We are really concerned that in this emergency situation we're going to ... see an increase in housing violations by overcrowding," Rice told the *Sun*. "There are not going to be adequate measures taken to ensure that workers can social distance, either at the housing or in the surrounding areas."

Furthermore, Rice said that there is a history of sending injured or sick H-2A workers home without medical treatment.

"We've seen this time and time again: H-2A workers, as soon as they're either injured or exhibit signs of illness, get shipped out so that the employer can ... stop providing the free housing," Rice said.

Scaroni, whose company is the largest full-service H-2A provider in the nation, said Fresh Harvest Inc. is "prepared to quarantine people if we have to, one person per room."

Given the highly infectious nature of coronavirus—and the fact that some infected people show little to no symptoms—it's possible that the disease could easily spread, especially in a line of work that doesn't always allow physical

distancing. As Wineman said, "In certain situations, 6 feet is not always feasible."

Wineman also emphasized that the food and agriculture industry is designated as a critical infrastructure sector by the federal government, meaning other sectors like water and energy are dependent on it. If one experiences a workforce hit, all sectors can suffer.

"Agriculture has been identified as one of those that are vital to the health and welfare of California, and it's imperative to continue those operations," Wineman said. "[We're] taking steps to make sure that we're protecting employees and continuing to provide the needed food."

Heading further into this season of continued caution, Rice also noted that workers need to know the risks and their rights.

"We're concerned that H-2A workers in particular are actually not going to get the information about what is needed to protect themselves from exposure to COVID-19," Rice said. "I think both the growers and the farm labor contractors, as well as the state agencies, need to really step up and make sure that adequate information is provided and targeted to H-2A workers so that they know how to protect themselves and how to assert their rights." ○

Reach Staff Writer Malea Martin at mmartin@santamariasun.com.



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FILE PHOTO BY JAYSON MELLOM

Preparing for losses

Cities and the county begin to weigh financial implications of COVID-19

BY ZAC EZZONE

As public health officials continue to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic, cities in Northern Santa Barbara County are beginning to understand how closures related to the virus are affecting their budgets.

With many businesses closing that are deemed nonessential under Gov. Gavin Newsom's stay-at-home order, local cities and the county are poised to lose millions of dollars in revenue from hotel and sales taxes. To make up these losses, cities need to reduce costs, pull money from reserve funds, or both.

The city of Solvang—which has a local economy almost entirely dependent on tourism, and therefore is one of the hardest hit jurisdictions in the county—declared an economic cessation emergency during a special City Council meeting on March 20. More than 50 percent of the city's general fund revenue comes from its transient occupancy tax, which hotel and motel guests pay; another 15 percent comes from sales tax collections.

During the meeting, City Manager Xenia Bradford told the council that the city could lose about \$500,000 a month for as long as the local economy remains nonexistent. This is a substantial amount of money for a city that operates on about \$9.5 million in general fund revenue annually.

To begin offsetting some of these losses, the city laid off eight employees on March 27, according to a message the city released from Mayor Ryan Toussaint to the public. In this message, issued a day after the lay-offs, the mayor said the city made these reductions to focus its funding on essential services, like water, law enforcement, and maintenance.

"The significant impacts of this unprecedented financial crisis are already being felt, but we must plan into the future not knowing how long this cessation will last or how long the recovery period will take, or cost," Toussaint said in the message.

Similarly to Solvang, as a city in the Santa Ynez Valley, Buellton relies heavily on tourism dollars for funding. City Manager Scott Wolfe said the



LOSING MONEY: Due to COVID-19 related business closures and shelter-at-home losses, cities in Santa Barbara County—including Solvang—are preparing to deal with losing revenue. The city laid off eight employees on March 27 in anticipation of transient occupancy tax and sales tax shortfalls.

city anticipates it'll lose \$1.35 million during the current fiscal year, which runs through June, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Wolfe said the city is beginning its budget adjustment process, but that it'll probably rely on a mix of expense reductions and the use of reserve funds, of which the city has more than \$10 million, to make up for the losses in revenue.

"These [reserve funds] are available for use as a 'rainy day' fund, and this pandemic would certainly qualify as a 'rainy day,'" Wolfe said.

Unlike Buellton and Solvang, the city of Santa Maria isn't as reliant on tourism dollars to keep the city afloat. Instead, city Public Information Manager Mark van de Kamp said sales tax revenue has traditionally been the lifeblood of the city's revenue streams. This income makes up almost half of the city's general fund.

With many retail businesses closed for the duration of the pandemic, Santa Maria is bracing for losses in revenue and subsequent budget cuts, although officials are still calculating what these numbers will look like, van de Kamp said.

"There's an inherent lag time between point-of-sale when consumers make a purchase and then reporting that to the state, and the state reporting to the city," van de Kamp said. "But we do fully expect to see a downturn that will be significant."

Van de Kamp said it'll be up to the City Council to decide how to make up for any losses in revenue, but that by law, the city is required to pass a balanced budget. However, the city initiated a hiring freeze on March 27 to begin reducing its expenses.

As for alternatives to cutting costs, the city maintains two different reserve funds, one of which had about \$2 million as of September 2019, while the other has about \$19 million. The city uses the former to bridge gaps between revenue and expenses, when the expenses are higher than revenue. Van de Kamp said the other fund is one the city hasn't touched in years and is in place for dire emergencies.

Santa Barbara County also appears to be in a position where it can sustain a temporary loss in revenue. During a Board of Supervisors meeting on March 24, Assistant County Executive Officer Jeff Frapwell said he anticipates the county will lose \$3 million in revenue during this fiscal year, which runs through June. But the county has about \$34 million in its strategic reserve fund to cover such a dip in revenue.

Fifth District Supervisor Steve Lavagnino said having that money to fall back on puts the county in a position to cope during this pandemic.

"Although we're going to have a lot of negative

impacts coming forward, I think we're well positioned because of some of the sacrifices that were made," Lavagnino said.

But for cities without such reserves available, the situation is a bit more unclear.

Tourism isn't as important in Lompoc as it is in Buellton or Solvang, but revenue from transient occupancy taxes makes up about 6.5 percent of the city budget. More costly is the anticipated reduction in sales tax revenue, which makes up about 15 percent of the city's general fund.

Lompoc City Manager Jim Throop said it's too early to truly understand how the pandemic will affect city finances, but right now he's anticipating about a \$1 million hit to the budget during this fiscal year. This is a problem for a city operating on an already slim budget, with only about \$1.5 million in reserves, compared to the \$8 million or \$9 million it should have in its reserve funds.

"When we adopted the budget, we made cuts and had a deficit," Throop said. "So trying to go back and make any other reductions would be pretty severe reductions. We have to, right now, get by with what is in the reserves." ○

Reach Staff Writer Zac Ezzone at zezzone@santamariasun.com.

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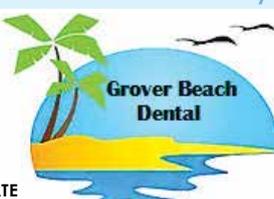
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Opening up

Local grocery stores designate morning shopping hours for those most impacted or at risk as a result of COVID-19

BY MALEA MARTIN

Grocery stores across Santa Maria are rising to the coronavirus challenge by designating specific morning hours for people most affected by product shortages. It's just one way that local businesses are stepping up to make sure that the most vulnerable populations are getting what they need in times of empty shelves and uncertainty.

"Monday through Friday from 7 to 9 [a.m.], we're inviting seniors to come in and do their shopping," Albertsons Assistant Manager Rene Santillan told the *Sun*. "If there's a line at the door, we welcome them in first. If there's other people under 65 we have them wait a little bit. We try to tell them to be here first thing in the morning, because that's usually when loads are here for vendors, so they're able to purchase their needs."

Albertsons' Santa Maria store also offers curbside pickup and is taking extra precautions to protect customers throughout the day.

"Throughout the day we're continuously sanitizing. The departments are cleaning the handles, the doors, things the customers would be touching," Santillan said. "Even though we close at 9, we're here until midnight cleaning and sanitizing the store."

Vallarta Supermarkets—with two Santa Maria stores located at 1482 S. Broadway and 1875 N. Broadway—are following similar steps to help those who need it most in the midst of the pandemic.

"We do have 7 to 8 in the morning only for seniors, pregnant women, and disabled people," Vallarta Third Store Director Martha Maldonado told the *Sun*. "We have two security guards on each door. We open the doors at 7 [and] make sure they can come in. We also marked the lines 6 feet apart so the customers know when they're ready to pay... they have to be 6 feet apart from each other."

Vallarta is also practicing heightened sanitary practices by instructing every department in the store to clean twice an hour.

"Every 30 minutes, all departments need to sanitize their area," Maldonado said. "We stop doing what we're doing and make sure we sanitize our area and then go back to work."

Both Albertsons and Vallarta store managers expressed that the general public can help



IN AND OUT: In addition to morning hours designated for elderly, pregnant, and disabled people and those with compromised immune systems, Vons offers a curbside pickup service for online orders.

supermarkets and grocery stores to keep up with demand by following the rules, being courteous to vulnerable populations, and only taking what they need.

"If they come in, just to do their daily shopping, not buy months in advance," Santillan said of how citizens can do their part. "Our

warehouses are running low. Everybody came in for toilet paper and canned goods and now the warehouses are running low on all that product."

Santa Maria Valley Chamber of Commerce CEO and President Glenn Morris told the *Sun* that grocery stores are not only serving the vital food needs of the community, but also helping the overall economy by keeping their doors open.

"To the extent that businesses can stay open and keep at least a portion of their employees working and paid... it keeps dollars flowing through the system," Morris said. "If people are still getting paid, then they're still paying their rent, the landlord can then pay his employees, and it keeps rolling."

Morris encouraged people to keep their shopping habits as close to normal as possible, and emphasized that local stores are beginning to catch up with demand.

"We don't all need to shop at 7 a.m. or at 5:30 in

the afternoon—go throughout the day... Buy what you need, leave some for somebody else," Morris said. "Many of the stores are fairly well restocked right now, and their supply chains are still working. There's not a need to rush in and buy everything on the shelves." ○

Malea Martin wrote this week's Spotlight. Send ideas to spotlight@santamariasun.com.



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- 19% Cooking, baking, and trying new recipes.
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Take profit out

Why our for-profit health care system is unprepared for this current crisis

BY GALE MCNEELEY

Every family in America has a horror story to tell around our current health care system. You know what it is. The high cost. The inability to be seen. The denials. The long waits for appointments. The cost of the cure. Many, who have cancer, have gone bankrupt trying to save a life. We all know this, but little has been done to cure our ailing health care system.

Big hospitals have bought out small ones. Medical care has become a monopoly in most places in our country. We are now stuck with what we have.

Add to this the health insurance companies, who only make money by denying service. Their actions are criminal. The same with the greedy drug companies, raising prices on simple drugs, and all for bigger profits.

Then there is the government, who for decades has been complicit in all of this. Republicans and Democrats alike. The last time we had a chance to fix the system, the president and the Congress would not even consider a public option. Lip service was paid to it, but the president didn't fight for it, and one Senate Democrat was allowed to take the public option off the table.

Today, we know that the for-profit health care system we have is not ready for a health crisis in the way a public health care system could be. There are not the hospitals or beds or protective gear or ventilators or even masks. The big fish have eaten the little fish, and we are left with bloated bureaucracies and not enough care.

If, on the other hand, a public health system had preserved small hospitals in every community and health care units in rural areas, we would have a better chance to fight this virus. If the profit motive were removed from

health care, attention could have been paid to preparation for the pandemic that many predicted would come. Bottom line is that if health care were a public good, a human right, it would be universal and less expensive to provide. Under those circumstances, we would not be scrambling for answers to the basic question: How do we, as a nation, face a pandemic together, and how can our health care system test for a virus, treat a virus, and develop a vaccine against a virus.

We are where we are because of greed and ignorance. Greed on the part of for-profit health care providers, insurance companies, and drug companies. Ignorance on the part of our leaders, and their funders.

Now we have to take profit out of the health care industry and provide care for all Americans, no matter whether they are white or black, rich or poor, a native American or an immigrant.

The rich should not be tested first, treated first, considered first in line. All American lives matter. So the government has the ability to change an unfair system to one that values all of us, especially in the midst of this pandemic. Those same senators and congressmen who have accepted contributions from the health care industry, health insurance companies, and drug makers have to stand up as one as say, "Americans are more important than the money you have given to me. I'm voting for them, and you need to help us in this crisis to save as many people as you can."

Bernie Sanders, yes that socialist we were told to fear, knows what has to be done and is ready to lead our country in the fight of our lives. What he is proposing in the Senate should be considered seriously, devoid of labels and special interests, and if his solutions are the right solutions, Congress should enact the legislation that is needed to fight this pandemic.

This extends to the economic costs of the virus to ordinary people. Corporations can take care of themselves. They always have and always will. Congress has to take care of us, the working people of America, who they have forgotten for so long. They have to give us financial relief now, and not in small measures like the Republicans propose. We, the people, have been deserted by politicians for too long. It is the decisions of this

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and past governments that have left us unprepared for this medical and financial disaster. They owe it to all Americans to make things right.

The Republicans, Democrats, and Independents in Congress need to drop their labels and be Americans. What is best for the people? Not their funders, not their party, not their ideology, but the people they have been elected to serve. If they answer that question honestly and with human compassion, we will survive this pandemic. There is no other course they can take. ○

Gale McNeeley writes from Santa Maria. Send comments through the editor at clanham@santamariasun.com or email a letter for publication to letters@santamariasun.com.

LETTERS

Know the unknowns

Let's say you have a koi pond with 100 fish, and one day you go out and you find one of the fish belly up. You test it and find out it died of a viral infection. At that point you have a 1 percent fatality rate. If there were 1,000 fish and that was the only dead fish, move the decimal point to the left for a .1 percent. Out of 10,000 fish that would be .0001 percent. But for simplicity let's just use our 100 fish base.

So as you proceed, you notice a couple of fish looking like they're pretty close to going belly up so you test them and both have the virus. So here's what we know. Three percent of your pond has been infected, that we know of, and you have had one fatality. You might venture that there's a 33 percent fatality rate of infected fish. But that would be false because you haven't tested every fish.

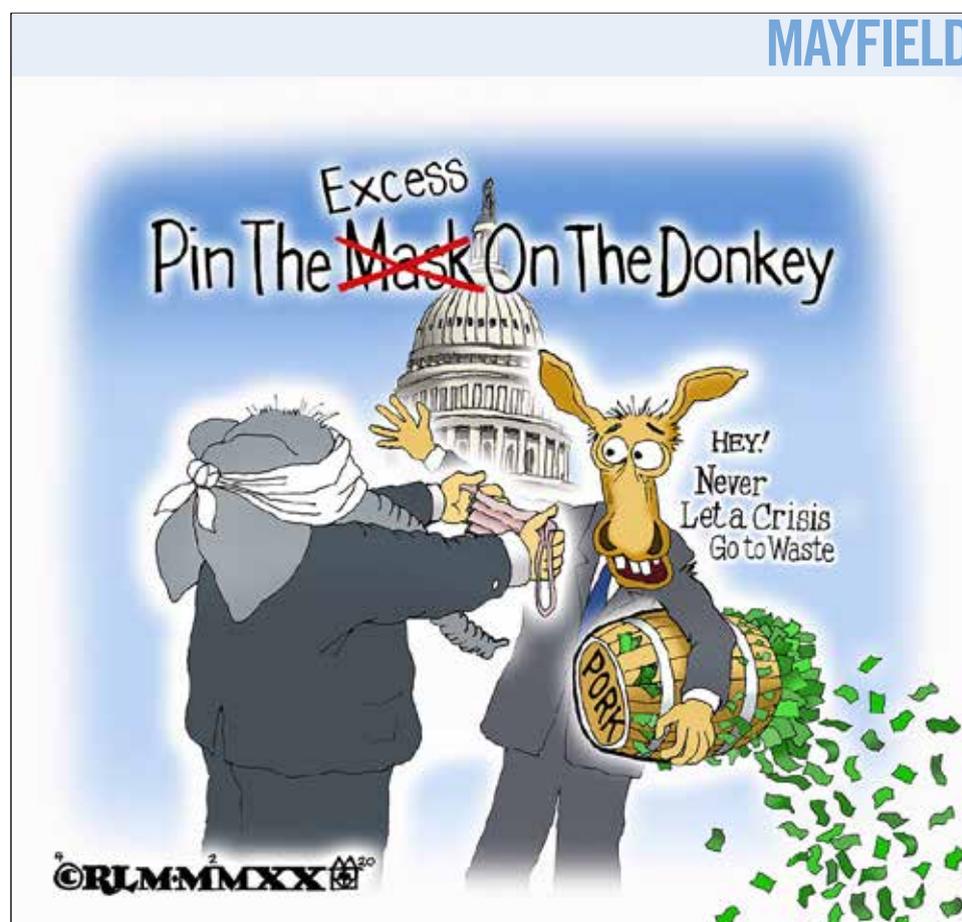
If you managed to test 50 percent of your fish and found all 50 were infected, the stats change. It would be wrong to project the infection rate suddenly increased from 3 percent to 50 percent of the population because you had no idea when they became infected. Only if you can test all the fish will you know how many are not infected. Only from that base can you continue testing on an ongoing basis. Only by comparing a changing infection rate can you make a valid calculation of the increase. Finding a new case when you don't know when that fish did not have an infection is meaningless to determine a rate of contagion. You can only say that the infection is widespread, but we have no idea at what rate.

Getting back to our base 100 and a second fish dies. Some would say the fatality rate has increased 100 percent, doubled if you like. Having tested only 50 percent, you can say erroneously there's 4 percent mortality rate. But that's only of the known infected fish. You also have other factors as to how lethal the virus is. How many of the deaths were fish that were 150 years old and had other underlying diseases.

In summary, be wary of facts expressed as percentages. Be very wary of numbers or percentages expressed with an unknown base. There are known unknowns.

Coronavirus is dangerous, but are things a little out of whack?

Jan Lipski
Vandenberg Village



Up to no good

Is there a communication breakdown or is it just me?

Maybe I live in a little bubble—surrounded by COVID-19 press conferences, press releases, case numbers, articles, businesses adjusting, and on and on—but it seems like there are people who haven't received the message.



Like, at all.

To help get the word out to those who can't seem to take a hint, emergency physicians at **Cottage Health** felt the need to pen a letter to the public.

We didn't have space in the **Sun** this week for it, but the warning came across loud and clear: Do your part, people. Listen to public health officials.

"This is not a political issue, not a liberal or conservative issue. This is a human issue. Regardless of your income or immigration status, every one of us is affected by this pandemic," the letter stated.

I think we should listen to them. It's not over-hyped by the media. Your **Santa Barbara County** public health officials are holding *daily briefings* about it. The county doesn't give daily updates about anything, unless it's an emergency—you know, like the mudslides in Montecito.

Yes, that was real emergency, too! And no, the liberal media didn't invent the virus to make **President Donald Trump** look bad. He does that all on his own!

But even in those updates, there's some weird stuff going on.

During the March 30 press briefing, a reporter asked **Public Health Officer Dr. Henning Ansorg** whether the county was going to add to its supply of 32 ventilators in the near future. Ansorg looked confused and asked the reporter where she got the number.

The number had come straight out of **Public Health Department Director Dr. Van Do-Reynoso's** mouth. Ansorg, caught off guard, said he couldn't say exactly how many the county actually had, but that he was sure the number was higher than that.

Maybe it's too hard from my non-doctorate-earning little bird brain to understand, but what? That's a number Ansorg and Do-Reynoso should absolutely, 100 percent be on the same page about. And it should also be accurate. So what gives, guys?

During the March 31 **Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors** meeting, we learned that the county currently has 85 ventilators with a request into the state for at least 100 more. But those numbers came from a public health department update—a county agency that seems incompetent at the moment.

Also, we still don't have an answer about how the county is planning to tackle the height of the epidemic, when cases surge and push area hospitals past their maxes. What's the plan guys? And why isn't the public informed about it?

On March 27, Do-Reynoso told reporters that county officials were having a meeting about surge-planning over the weekend. Still, the public had no information about what the plan was when we went to press on March 31.

Meanwhile, **SLO County** has given the public a detailed list of exactly what it's doing to build a temporary care facility at **Cal Poly**, complete with a timeline for completion—April 8, if you were wondering.

What I'm wondering is where Santa Barbara County's communication is breaking down. ○

The Canary is a communication expert. Seek advice at canary@santamariasun.com.



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March 27, 2020

Dear Hancock Students,

During this unsettling time, we want you to know your faculty and staff at Allan Hancock College care about your safety and well-being. With classes switching to remote delivery, you are adapting to new ways of learning. We know that many of you (and your family) are now facing real and immediate financial challenges through no fault of your own. The loss of time to gather with family, friends, and the community will certainly increase our anxiety.

It would be tempting to drop out, withdraw, and not finish the Spring 2020 Semester—with the idea that you will pick up your studies when things return to routine. And that impulse is very understandable.

We write this letter to provide a simple message: **Don't do it.**

Now more than ever, stay in school. Complete this semester and remain on track for earning your degree or certificate. You've already invested a lot in this semester and are well on the path to a life-changing achievement, one that sets you up for the best opportunities in the future. Even if you aren't graduating this year, you are on your way to a degree or certificate that will put you in a better position to weather the next crisis.

The faculty and staff of Allan Hancock College are committed to supporting you – all services are available online and by phone. We have implemented and enhanced [many resources](#), including:

- An [emergency fund](#) that provides financial help, with support of the Allan Hancock College Foundation, through the Office of the Vice President of Student Services and an expanded [Food Share Because We Care](#);
- Special programs such as the [AIM to Dream Center](#), [Veteran Success Center](#) and [MESA/STEM Center](#), [Student Health Services](#), [tutoring](#), and [library services](#) will continue to provide services remotely;
- Student Support services such as [Counseling](#), [EOPS](#), [CalWORKs](#), [NextUp/Foster Youth](#) and [CARE](#) have set up remote access to assist students; and,
- Cranium Café's "one stop shop" allows you to schedule appointments with nearly anyone on campus — including [Community Education](#) (ESL, Basic Skills and Citizenship) – via phone, email, live chat, or video chat; Access Cranium Café through your [myHancock portal](#).

Our message to you is to stay on your academic paths. In the short term, the routine of attending class (remotely) and studying will provide a welcome distraction. The long-term rewards for completing will last a lifetime, long after the coronavirus pandemic fades.

On behalf of your Bulldog community, we're here to help.

Kevin G. Walthers, Ph.D.
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Arts Briefs

Santa Maria Recreation and Parks Department offers new at-home videos

SCREENSHOT COURTESY OF THE CITY OF SANTA MARIA'S YOUTUBE CHANNEL



The city of Santa Maria's Recreation and Parks Department is producing an ongoing series of short, family-friendly "how to" videos focused on keeping good physical and mental health during the current COVID-19 quarantine.

The videos are available on the city of Santa Maria's YouTube channel and range from arts and crafts demonstrations to stay-at-home music lessons (including guitar lessons hosted by former *Sun* Managing Editor Joe Payne). Creative assignments for viewers to take part in include origami projects and other crafts.

Aside from arts activities, one part of the series, hosted by Bradford Flickinger, focuses on home entertainment and informs families on how to take advantage of streaming services available nowadays. In his first video, Flickinger goes into detail about GeForce Now, a video game streaming service, and demonstrates how patrons can use the app on their computers or phones.

To find out more about the video series, visit youtube.com/cityofsantamariacalifornia or contact the Recreation and Parks Department directly at (805) 925-0951.

Gavin's Books offers free delivery in Orcutt and Santa Maria

Gavin's Books, a Santa Maria bookstore, is now accepting orders for free deliveries from Santa Maria and Orcutt residents. Locals who feel stuck at home and in need of a good read are encouraged to take advantage of the new delivery option. Patrons can also order book deliveries for friends and loved ones (in Santa Maria and Orcutt).

To find out more about the delivery service, visit gavinsbooks.com or contact the store directly at (805) 922-4282. Gavin's Books is located at 230 E. Betteravia Road, suite K, Santa Maria.

Riverbench Winery organizes live-stream Easter activities

Because of coronavirus cautions and social distancing mandates, a Santa Maria winery is putting a creative spin on its annual Easter egg hunt this year. Instead of hiding more than 2,000 candy- and prize-filled eggs in its garden for children to search and gather, the Riverbench Winery easter egg hunt will be held in a way that will help keep the winery's staff gainfully employed.

Riverbench will send each child who signs up a half-dozen prize-filled eggs so they can enjoy their own hunt at home. The winery will also host a live broadcast from the vineyard with a special visit from the Easter Bunny.

Ticket sales end April 3, and the eggs will be mailed at that time. Ticket holders and egg hunters can tune in April 11 at 11 a.m. for the live broadcast on Facebook and Instagram. Tickets cost \$5 each and can be purchased at 2020-easter-egg-hunt.eventbrite.com. For more information, visit riverbench.com.

Arts Briefs is compiled by Arts Editor Caleb Wiseblood. Send information to cwiseblood@santamariasun.com.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WILDLING MUSEUM/ART BY NATHAN HUFF



VIEW THE MUSEUM FROM HOME: The Wildling Museum of Art and Nature is currently sharing virtual glimpses of its art exhibitions online through Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Complete virtual tours of each exhibit are also available on the museum's website (wildlingmuseum.org).

Halcyon hashtag

The Wildling Museum of Art and Nature takes part in timely, meditative social media campaign, #MuseumMomentofZen

BY CALEB WISEBLOOD

With galleries, museums, theaters, and other venues closed for the foreseeable future, the current state of the art world at large is almost exclusively online. The staff of the Wildling Museum of Art and Nature already had a strong handle (pun intended) on social media long before the COVID-19 outbreak (scroll through the museum's Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter if you don't believe me), but social distancing has encouraged the team to step up their game even further.

Along with nearly 2,500 art museums around the world, the Wildling Museum is taking part in an international social media campaign, entitled #MuseumMomentofZen. Those who keep tabs (again, pun intended) on the hashtag can look forward to a newsfeed full of shared artworks—intended to break the bleak monotony of posts related to coronavirus—from participating museums.

"It's a wonderful way for us to share amazing artworks we have here on loan for our exhibitions, as well as our permanent collection," Stacey Otte-Demangate, executive director of the Wildling Museum, told the *Sun*. "Museums are full of creative people all over the country, and we all feel the duty to continue to serve our communities as best we can."

Among the artworks the museum has shared so far include pieces from *Starry Nights: Visions of the Night Sky*; *Solvang School: Inspired in Nature*; and *Santa Barbara County and Beyond: Recent Photographic Landscapes* by George Rose. Although offering the artworks free and online doesn't provide compensation to the artists involved, Otte-Demangate hopes grant-making agencies will soon alleviate the troubles of struggling artists during this unprecedented crisis.

"This is a tough time for the arts and artists, no question," Otte-Demangate said. "Artists are driven to create and share their work. And there's already been an incredible outpouring of

their work online. But that doesn't pay their bills. I'm hoping that there will be granting agencies that step up to help support us in the coming months.

"Of course social service agencies will be facing the most need, but I hope the arts sector isn't forgotten," Otte-Demangate added. "I just hope all of us as individuals really step up in compassion and generosity to our fellow citizens in the days ahead."

The Wildling Museum's social media campaign is spearheaded by Assistant Director Lauren Sharp, who provides verbal context to each artwork post, including info on each work's respective artist. Complete virtual tours of each exhibition are also available on the museum's website, for followers who prefer an even higher dose of Zen than their

newsfeed picks up.

As the museum is one of both art and nature, it's only appropriate for its social media accounts to encourage the community to "spend a little time in nature when you need to de-stress."

"Art and nature are wonderful avenues of solace and inspiration during trying times," Otte-Demangate said.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, Oso Flaco Lake was one of Otte-Demangate's favorite places to hike, but State Parks closed vehicle access to several Central Coast beach



WILD AND FREE: One of the Wildling Museum's first #MuseumMomentofZen posts highlighted this photograph by student Isabella Rhea, featured in the museum's Solvang School: Inspired in Nature exhibit. The theme of the exhibit is based on philosopher Henry David Thoreau's quote: "All good things are wild and free."

PHOTO COURTESY OF BJ FULTON



OBSERVE FOR YOURSELF: Included in the Wildling Museum's Starry Nights exhibit, this photograph of the Thor's Helmet emission nebula was captured by BJ Fulton while conducting research at the Las Cumbres Observatory in Goleta.

areas—including Oso Flaco—on March 27.

"I'd also recommend an easy walk to Nojoqui Falls," she added, "which should be flowing pretty well—just check ahead of time to make sure it's open as rainy weather can cause temporary closures."

Also in light of COVID-19 shelter-in-place measures, the museum's social media accounts are sharing arts and crafts projects for children and adults to complete at home together, Otte-Demangate said. One post on the museum's Instagram encourages kids to take up recycled art projects, using discarded items from around their own households.

"We want to share art and craft activities families can do from home, now that schools are closed," she said. "One of our main focuses is repurposing and reusing materials, like toilet paper tubes."

Just when you thought the demand for toilet paper rolls couldn't possibly get any higher. ○

Arts Editor Caleb Wiseblood wants to see what you've been working on. Send your latest art projects to cwiseblood@santamariasun.com.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GEORGE ROSE



FIND YOUR HAPPY PLACE: This landscape of Happy Canyon in Santa Ynez by photographer George Rose is featured in *Santa Barbara County and Beyond*, a photographic landscapes exhibit at the Wildling Museum.



Latino Legacy Awards 2020 Honorees



Lifetime Achievement

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Cam Camarena

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Miguel Avila

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Santa Barbara County Promotores Network

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Maria Larios-Horton

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Latino Legacy Award

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Mary Jane Becerra Corral
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Buy Gift Cards and Support Small Businesses in No. SB County!

Purchasing gift cards from our local businesses can help stimulate the economy now.

With orders that restaurants can only serve takeout or delivery, our county's restaurant industry has been among the hardest hit by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. People are being encouraged to stay home and away from crowds and public places. Stores have already been forced to dial back hours in response to the decrease in business, while others have shut down entirely. With small businesses facing an uncertain immediate future, one way locals can support their favorite businesses is by purchasing gift cards. Whether given as a gift or kept for the future, gift cards can act as a microloan for businesses to provide much-needed immediate cash. Many businesses sell gift cards online, allowing customers to offer their support without having to leave home.

There has never been a more important time to support our local business scene. Stores are emptying out and small business owners are seeing up to an 80% drop-off in customers. Lots of small businesses already work off razor-thin profit margins, but the COVID-19 pandemic is a test like no other. For now, the best thing our friends and neighbors in the community can do to help is to buy gift cards to ensure at least some income during this difficult time.

If this trend continues, many of our beloved businesses will suffer greatly but we have the opportunity to help.

Buy gift cards. Businesses collect gift card revenue as soon as the card is purchased, then mark it as redeemed once the user applies it to a bill. If you are in a position to buy a gift card and sit on it for a while, you will be helping your local favorite get through a tough time.

Many businesses are opting for curbside pickup or have pick-up areas where you can dash in, get your items and leave.

Please show your support. Let's do this together.



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PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBERT ERINGER



DRIVE MY CAR: Since 2014, author and journalist Robert Eringer (pictured) has used his online blog, Clubhouse on Wheels, to chronicle his various cross-county road trips. One such road trip became the inspiration for his latest fiction novel, *Book Drive*.

Literary escape

Central Coast local Robert Eringer revs up his upcoming road trip novel, *Book Drive*

BY CALEB WISEBLOOD

Amid our current reality—or any reality for that matter—there are few better ways to spend time cooped up at home than with a good read, and better yet, with the knowledge you're supporting a local writer in the process.

The published works of Santa Barbara-based novelist and journalist Robert Eringer range back to the 1980s. But 2014 marked a unique turn for Eringer—the year he started an online blog appropriately titled Clubhouse on Wheels, as he used the outlet to chronicle his

various cross-county road trips from that point on. One such trip became the inspiration for his latest work of fiction, *Book Drive*.

"In the interest of not avoiding your question, this is a road novel," Eringer replied, after I asked him what genre he would label *Book Drive* under.

Book it

More info on Robert Eringer's next novel, *Book Drive*, and his complete bibliography can be found on roberteringer.com. His books are available to purchase through Amazon and other outlets. Readers can also keep up with Eringer's online blog at clubhouseonwheels.com.

"The protagonist of my novel is a novelist, and, as he puts it, 'There's no such thing as genre. It's just a modern invention,'" he continued. "There's good writing and bad writing; good storytelling and bad storytelling. Period."

Although the book's

protagonist, Christopher Lathom, shares the same profession as Eringer, the character is actually based on one of his peers in the writing field.

"Lathom is not based on me. His first novel, published 30 years ago, was considered a literary classic. That is *definitely* not me," Eringer joked. "But who knows, maybe there's still time."

"His character was indeed inspired by an author I know, though I prefer to keep his identity to myself," Eringer added.

The plot of the novel follows Lathom on a "hellish" week-long book tour he reluctantly agrees to, pressed upon him by his publisher. The tour takes him from his quiet home in Montecito up the West Coast to Seattle, Washington.

Although the story itself is fictional, Eringer used intimate details from a real road trip he took to give the book as much nuance as possible. Eringer didn't make the trek alone however, as he was joined by one of his good friends—the

mentioned anonymous writing peer—who inevitably became the basis for Lathom.

Eringer documented the trip in detail, recording most of it on his Clubhouse on Wheels blog, and arrived home with a plethora of story and setting inspiration to draw from.

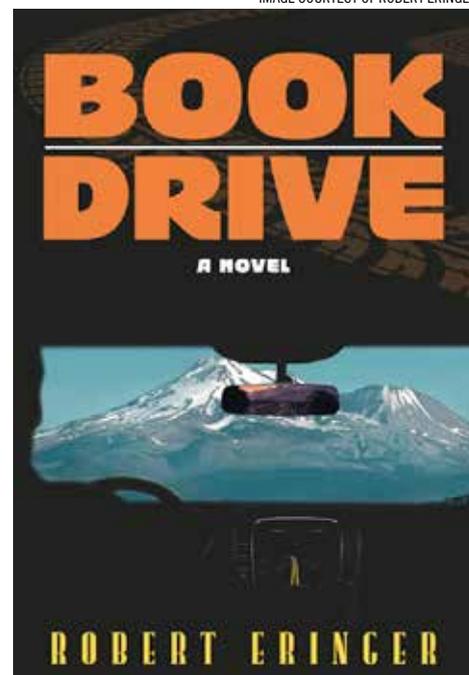
"By the time I get home, I have a journal packed with detail and a mind stimulated by new experiences," he said. "Even random incidents become anecdotal to the plot—a verisimilitude that can never be accomplished by staying home and studying Google Maps."

"I get to weave genuine settings with a fabricated story—a marriage of journalism and fiction," the local author added.

Eringer hopes the nuanced details will keep readers wholly invested in the story, as if they're in the passenger seat, sitting right next to Lathom as he journeys up the coast.

"The essence of a road trip—and my novel—is motion," Eringer said. "Such motion needs to be conveyed to the reader as if he or she is present—sitting in a car, motioning along with the story's characters, overhearing dialogue, enjoying the scenery, and witnessing every nuance." ○

IMAGE COURTESY OF ROBERT ERINGER



BETWEEN THE LINES: The plot of *Book Drive* follows its protagonist, Christopher Lathom, on a week-long book tour, which takes him from his quiet home in Montecito up the West Coast to Seattle, Washington.

FILE PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBERT ERINGER



AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL? "Lathom is not based on me. His first novel, published 30 years ago, was considered a literary classic. That is *definitely* not me," Robert Eringer (pictured) said jokingly, when asked if *Book Drive*'s protagonist was based on himself.

Life is a highway and Arts Editor Caleb Wiseblood wants to ride it all night long. Reach him at cwiseblood@santamariasun.com.

A brief story, fifty-five words or less, with a headline no longer than seven words.

We accept entries to our annual **55 Fiction** writing contest all year long.

Entries submitted by 5pm on June 11, 2020 will be considered for this year's publications which will be out on July 9, 2020.

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For more details: bit.ly/55Fiction

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TV Reviews

TABOO

What's it rated? **TV-MA**
Where's it showing? **FX, Hulu, Amazon Prime**

Now in its second season on FX, the BBC's fictionalized historical drama centers on adventurer James Keziah Delaney (Tom Hardy), who after disappearing into Africa for 10 years and being presumed dead, turns up in London upon the death of his father to collect his inheritance. His father's beleaguered trading company, and more importantly, a disputed but highly valuable piece of America—the Nootka Sound, a strategic trading location that's desperately coveted by the East India Trading Company, which will stop at nothing to acquire it. The War of 1812 is drawing to a close (it's approximately 1814), and both the fledgling U.S. government and England want control of Nootka Sound.

Run by Sir Stewart Strange (Jonathan Pryce), East India has its work cut out for it because Delaney is as ruthless and cunning as Strange, and maybe—just maybe—Delaney's in league with the devil. He's definitely a man with few people he can trust. He left London under a black cloud for an incestuous affair with his now-married half-sister, Zilpha Geary (Ona Chaplin). He also has Brace (David Hayman), his father's loyal servant. The actress Lorna Bow (Jessie Buckley) also becomes part of Delaney's elaborate plan to leverage his control of the Nootka Sound into power.

Dark, violent, and frequently disturbing, this is a riveting series that's visually arresting and well-acted. I'm still in season one, but this is binge-worthy. (Sixteen 59 min. episodes.)
—Glen

WHAT WE DO IN THE SHADOWS

What's it rated? **TV-MA**

Where's it showing? **FX, Hulu**

Based on the hilarious 2014 comedy horror film of the same name, this sitcom-like TV series follows three vampire roommates living in New York City. Season 2 is set to premiere on April 15, so now's the time to catch up with Nandor the Relentless (Kayvan Novak), Laszlo Cravensworth (Matt Berry), and Nadja (Natasia Demetriou), who's married to Laszlo but is carrying on an affair with a human named Jeff Suckler (Jake McDorman), the reincarnation of Nadja's former human lover, Gregor, whom she accidentally decapitated.

There's also Guillermo (Harvey Guillén), Nandor's patient "familiar," aka servant, and Colin Robinson (Mark Proksch), an "energy vampire" who lives with the trio who can drain both humans' and vampires' energy because he's so boring.

The sitcom's a lot of satirical fun. Another recurring character is Jenna (Beanie Feldstein), a LARPer and virgin who was supposed to be a vampire meal to feast on, but who Nadja felt sorry for and turned into a vampire. Jenna's special power is invisibility, because she was ignored as a human.

If you need a few laughs, this show reliably supplies them. (ongoing, 20 30-min. episodes) ○

—Glen

Sun television reviews are compiled by New Times Senior Staff Writer Glen Starkey. Contact him at gstarkey@newtimeslo.com.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE BBC



HEART OF DARKNESS:

Tom Hardy stars as James Keziah Delaney, an adventurer with dark secrets, who's caught in the middle of a trade war, in the visually arresting historical fiction, *Taboo*.

Twisted tail

Editor's note: Movie theaters aren't open for the foreseeable future due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions that have come with it. And we know you're stuck at home, so we thought we'd help you figure out what to watch from the comfort of your couch. For the next few weeks, Glen and Anna will be reviewing recently released movies, TV shows, and series available via online streaming services. Good luck out there. And stay healthy.

Rebecca Chaiklin and Eric Goode direct this seven-part documentary about big cat owners who run roadside zoos and attractions. The main character is Joe Exotic—aka Joseph Allen Maldonado-Passage—a gay polygamist with two husbands who sports a dyed-blond mullet and a six-shooter pistol at his side, and who fancies himself a country singer. He runs an Oklahoma roadside zoo that specializes in a tiger cub petting. There's also Bhagavan Antle, who runs a slightly more upscale zoo that employs several beautiful young women who are Antle's lovers residing in various houses on his rambling property. Finally, there's Carole Baskin, a self-described animal rights activist who owns a big cat sanctuary run largely by unpaid volunteers. Her goal is to put people like Joe Exotic and Antle out of business. She also may have killed her husband and fed him to her big cats. The rivalry between Baskin and Joe Exotic eventually leads to a murder-for-hire situation, in this twisted true-life story. (seven 45 min. episodes)

TIGER KING: MURDER, MAYHEM, AND MADNESS

What's it rated? **TV-MA**
Where's it showing? **Netflix**

Glen: Judging from my Facebook feed, most of my quarantined friends have already dipped their toes into this weird tale, so it almost seems like old news, but in case you're hunkered down in your house unaware that *Tiger King* exists, this is a look into a train wreck you didn't know you needed to see, but you do. Personally, I'd love to play with a 6-week-old tiger cub! It's a powerful draw, and the desire to be around these magnificent creatures apparently turns people nuts! Joe's two husbands aren't even gay, but between Joe's larger-than-life personality, his collection of exotic animals, and an apparently endless supply of meth, John Finlay and Dillion Passage are drawn into Joe's world—a world of competition with Baskin, who Joe frequently kills in effigy on his internet TV program *Joe Exotic TV*. As I watched, I couldn't believe my eyes, and as Joe's paranoia increases, he's soon surrounding himself with criminals, con men, and worse. It's quite a tale. Anna: This thing really has exploded. People are obsessed with Joe and his red-necked weirdness.



STRANGER THAN FICTION: Joe Exotic, currently imprisoned for a murder-for-hire scheme of one of his rivals, is at the center of *Tiger King*, a new limited TV miniseries on Netflix.

This story wasn't new to me. I listened to the Wondery podcast *Over My Dead Body: Joe Exotic* when it came out a while ago. (It's rereleased under the title *Joe Exotic: Tiger King*.) I will say that this series should come with a warning: There's clearly a lot of disregard for animal welfare, and it can be difficult to bear. Joe makes his money through cub petting experiences. He travels to malls around the country doing his animal/magic show. Baskin

works to stop this, waging a campaign to shut down Joe's shows and his zoo. His workers seem loyal but heavily flawed—this series is basically an unintended advertisement for staying away from drugs. I think this whole story is totally fascinating, but I caution its audience to be aware of the language and tone used. Joe's no hero or innocent man in a bad circumstance. He disregards the well-being of his animals and exploits cubs taken far too early from their mothers, all to make a buck. He resorts to criminal behavior if he thinks it's justified. He's far from a good guy.

Glen: I wholly agree. I also think Baskin, even though she portrays herself as the savior of big cats, is pretty shady. I don't know if she killed her husband, who basically bankrolled her animal rescue before disappearing into the ether, but her early career with big cats toyed with the same sort of abuses she's now fighting against. Nothing wrong with having a change of heart, but there's something hypocritical about her self-righteousness. Essentially, everyone in this story either seems to be an exploiter or the

exploited. Joe, Baskin, and Antle are all cults of personality surrounded by sycophants. We also meet some really creepy types, like self-described businessmen Jeff Lowe and James Garretson, who have insinuated themselves into Joe's life and business just as he's spinning wildly out of control. The documentary's subtitle is accurate: murder, mayhem, and madness indeed. These people are nuts!

Anna: One thing it brought to light for me is how little restriction there is in some places regarding owning and breeding exotic animals. It isn't a cheap lifestyle either—Joe resorts to feeding his animals past-date meat from Walmart and cows that died before they could be slaughtered. Healthy animals don't drop dead, and as someone who knows how animals in agriculture are cared for, I hate to think what those cats are ingesting. Baskin is problematic, too. Her "sanctuary" is no different than Joe's: just cages with big cats stuck in them for life. She may not be breeding and exploiting cubs, but she's by no means free of wrongdoing. As far as her missing husband goes, who knows? It's an added salacious detail but still a mystery. This has a very *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia* vibe, like watching a white-trash train wreck with no shortage of drama. If you can handle the crazy and are a fan of watching chaos from the other side of a fishbowl, have at it. I found it fascinating. ○

New Times Senior Staff Writer Glen Starkey and freelancer Anna Starkey write Sun Screen. Glen compiles streaming listings. Comment at gstarkey@newtimeslo.com.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF ANDREA CHAVEZ



in Arroyo Grande, Box Program Manager Andrea Chavez has been seeing a spike in the number of customers who signed up for their farm box program. She said that as of the week of March 16, people were still signing up.

“We’re seeing a big increase in older customers wanting boxes delivered to their home versus picking up at one of our 70 pickup locations,” Chavez said. “The wholesale side of our farm is business as usual, with some of our older office employees working from home. Our sales to food service accounts are slower, but sales to our retail accounts are strong.”

Chavez said their packing crew started at 6 a.m. rather than 6:30 a.m., and they’ve been using more trucks to make home deliveries. Some of their pickup locations have changed, as gyms and other businesses close, so customers are being notified by email.

Chavez said people are buying their produce all at once right now, noting that grocery store produce shelves are light in supplies as more people are cooking at home and “perhaps realizing they need to eat healthier.”

Finley Farms in Santa Ynez is giving \$25 farm boxes a try. Pay by Tuesday and pick up a box on Thursday. Boxes for the week of March 30 had lettuce, celery, broccolini, kale, arugula, fennel, celery root, and spinach. According to Facebook posts from the farm, they are currently taking it day by day, but for the moment, Finley’s farm stand is open daily from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. at 1702 N. Refugio Road. Visit the farm on Facebook for more information.

Dare 2 Dream Farms in Lompoc is currently sold out of its CSA boxes, but it’s working to open up a couple of more spaces. The farm stand is open from 10 a.m. to dusk every day except for Monday, at 890 LaSalle Canyon Road in Lompoc. Local honey, mushrooms from Wolfe Family Farms, and supplemental veggies from Tutti Frutti Farms will be on hand. And, those farm-fresh eggs that usually make a trek to far away places are going to stay put in Lompoc. They will be stocked up as often as Dare 2 Dream’s little chickens can lay them, but supplies are limited.

Bautista Family Farms is also offering up a grab-and-go pre-made produce box from its stand in Arroyo Grande. Each box, \$20, can be picked up Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9 to 11 a.m. and 4 to 6 p.m., and Saturdays from 9 a.m. to noon. ○

Contributing writer Beth Giuffre is supporting her local farmers right now. Editor Camillia Lanham contributed to this article. Send COVID-19 food ideas to clanham@santamariasun.com.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TALLEY FARMS



RAINBOWS IN A BOX: Talley Farms Fresh Harvest CSA farm-share program offers a variety of seasonal fresh fruits and veggies delivered weekly, biweekly, and monthly to pickup locations in SLO and Northern Santa Barbara counties.

CSA BOXES SOAR: Andrea Chavez, of Talley Farms, holds one of their popular farm boxes. Their produce boxes have been in demand since the pandemic, as many local farms have seen increases in subscribers since mid March’s countywide and statewide shelter-in-place announcements.

Small farms keep going

Local growers are coping as restaurants close and social distancing is changing everything

BY BETH GIUFFRE

It’s awfully quiet outside. But farmers have not stopped the plows.

Checking in with our local food growers, many reported a huge increase in CSA boxes and farm stand sales. And local farmers’ markets are seeing increased visitors.

Kathy McNay, who organizes farmers’ markets in Northern Santa Barbara County, said more people seem to be willing to go to the farmers’ market over a grocery store.

“They’re telling us they feel safer out in the air than in an enclosed market,” McNay said. “The only reason we’re able to operate is the state of California, they’re treating us like a grocery store. And you know, we have our little gloves on and people are keeping their distance, so it’s working.”

California considers the produce and food sold at farmers’ markets to be a necessity, therefore markets aren’t subject to closures like other businesses.

As long as people follow the rules—maintaining 6-foot distances from others, washing/sanitizing hands frequently, and not touching their face—going to open air farmers’ markets should be fine. McNay has been in the farmers’ market

business for 35-plus years and said she is happy to see an increase in customers for local farmers.

Vendors are at Clark and Bradley in Orcutt every Tuesday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., Broadway and Main Street in Santa Maria every Wednesday from noon to 4 p.m., and Ocean and I streets in Lompoc every Friday from 2 to 6 p.m. If you want to see who’s selling at what market, McNay encourages you to just check the market out for yourself.

“We’re just old-school, we just flow,” she said.

Local growers are also flowing, making the necessary adjustments during the COVID-19 pandemic. If you think about it, farmers are always reinventing themselves—they either have the weather on their side, or not.

Jerry Rutiz, owner of Rutiz Family Farms in Arroyo Grande, said it’s been chaotic since the shelter-in-place orders began. He said he sells 95 percent of his organic produce through his food stand on The

Pike, serving mostly people who live within a 5-mile radius. He sells to a handful of restaurants such as Ember, Spoon Trade, and Apple Farm, and runs a Friday pickup for CSA box subscribers, which has become more popular recently,

especially with seniors.

“People seemed like they were buying lots of stuff,” Rutiz said.

In addition to his produce, people can also buy See Canyon fruit, bakery bread, and locally ranch beef, chicken, and pork at his stand.

To keep cross contamination from happening, Rutiz said he eliminated self-service, placing all his produce behind a table. One of his staff, in gloves, was taking orders and packing the veggies in a box for the customer, while the money station was manned by another staff person. Rutiz has always only taken cash or check, but he cut the coins out of the equation when he heard that coins carry more germs than bills.

Rutiz said his biggest worry right now is health. The 63-year-old farmer said he checks in with his staff regularly to see if they are feeling OK.

“If they’re at a point when they start getting sick ... we will stop. We can’t do anything ... and if that time comes, then there’s nothing that we can do,” he said.

Rutiz mentioned one of his blueberry partners had to stop delivering because his workers had to stay home with their kids, who need supervision at home due to school closures.

At Talley Farms

Farmers’ markets in North Santa Barbara County

On March 19, the state issued an executive order telling all Californians to shelter at home, meaning only essential government functions will continue, while essential businesses, such as farmers’ markets, are encouraged to remain open.

Market organizers ask the public to practice social distancing, let the farmers’ get your product for you, and stay home if you are sick.

Here are the locations and hours of the farmers’ markets near you:

- **Orcutt:** Tuesdays from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. (Clark Avenue and Bradley Road)
- **Santa Maria:** Wednesdays from noon to 4 p.m. (Broadway and Main Street)
- **Lompoc:** Fridays from 2 to 6 p.m. (Ocean Avenue and I Street)

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