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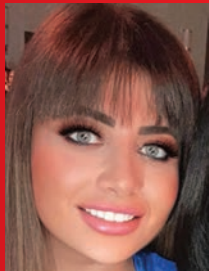


Heather Diamond

25TH ANNUAL  
**40 UNDER 40**



Hilary Dargavell



Jolyana Jirjees



Aaron Rockwell



Devon J Arabo



Andrea Cisneros



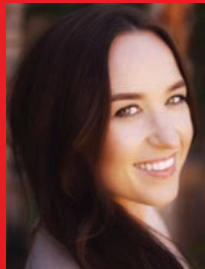
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Kareem A Salem



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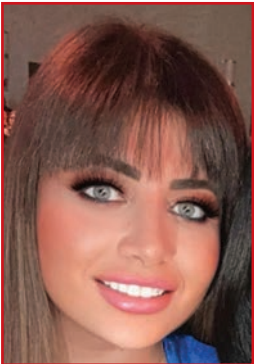
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# 25<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL 40 UNDER 40

40 Under 40 is San Diego's premier event honoring outstanding young leaders. Sponsored by SD METRO Magazine, 40 Under 40 began in 1999, making this the 25th consecutive year. Over this period of time 1,000 of San Diego's most outstanding young people have been honored.



## JOLYANA JIRJEES

She is the executive director of the Chaldean Community Council in El Cajon. Born in Mosul, Iraq, she and her husband fled to the United States in 2011, when she was six months pregnant with her first child. As Jolyana says, "Growing up it was not safe, and we lived in terror," she said. She arrived in the United States at 19 without knowing any English. She diligently studied the language and worked until she earned her master's degree. She began at the Chaldean Community Council in 2021 and has since expanded the nonprofit's offerings by adding comprehensive social services for underprivileged and underrepresented refugee families in El Cajon. These services include education, job training, health and wellness programs. The CCC has also launched the El Cajon Small Business Incubator program. She'll begin her doctoral degree in Educational Leadership studies next month.



## HEATHER DIAMOND

She is the senior vice president for business development and community relations for the San Diego County Credit Union. Her inherent ability to develop and grow relationships has helped SDCCU to expand throughout Southern California. She has led an integrated effort to deliver more financial help to the community, to enable clients to make educated financial decisions. She leads SDCCU's support of many nonprofits each year. She led SDCCU's launch of its inaugural Lift Up Literacy book drive campaign in partnership with the San Diego County Library to promote literacy throughout San Diego County. Her efforts in the community have earned notable recognition for SDCCU. Her passion and approach to community relations, business development and public relations have contributed greatly to SDCCU's growth and success. SDCCU has grown to over \$13 billion in assets and now has over 436,000 members. She is a graduate of Colorado Mesa University with an MBA from San Diego State University.



### **HILARY DARGAVELL**

She is the chief of operations at RJS Law. She is a jack-of-all-trades tireless executive and not afraid to roll up her sleeves and tackle any task ranging from administrative duties to managing multiple properties and orchestrating complex events. She is a strategic thinker who always keeps the big picture in mind, while being meticulous in her attention to detail. She does it all with exceptional skill and grace. She is a natural leader who inspires her colleagues to work harder. She is a remarkable young woman who makes an incredible impression. She has streamlined operations and built a culture of collaboration and mutual respect at RJS Law. She received her associate degree in mathematics and science from Cuyamaca College.



### **DEVON J ARABO**

Arabo is Of Counsel at RJS Law who has demonstrated exceptional legal skills and a commitment to the San Diego community. He's been the lead attorney for complex ERTC matters, demonstrating a deep understanding of tax law and tax policy and an ability to navigate complex legal issues. His expertise has earned clients millions of dollars in employee retention tax credits. He is a zealous advocate and has experience handling both criminal and civil controversy cases before the IRS. He has a proven record of successfully counseling clients through audits before various state and federal taxing authorities. He is a proud "Triple Torero", having graduated from the University of San Diego with his bachelor's degree in accounting, from the USD School of Law with his Juris Doctor and a Master of Law in taxation, also from USD.



### **ANDREA CISNEROS**

She leads the international tax department at RJS Law. She has helped structure billions of dollars in investments in the United States. She helps investors comply with US tax laws and regulations. Also, when her U.S. clients invest or reside outside the United States, she helps them keep compliant with the country's laws and regulations. She is a member of the LKa Raza Lawyers Association and the San Diego Chamber of Commerce. She's licensed to practice in both California and Mexico. She understands both commonwealth and statutory law and can advise her international clients. She is a graduate of the University of San Diego School of Law.



### **ALLEGRA MORABITO**

She is a beacon of exemplary leadership and innovative thinking in her role as the chief financial officer of V Group. During an era marked by unprecedented financial complexity and social consciousness, she has not only met but exceeded the expectations of her position, driving remarkable growth and fostering a culture of social responsibility within her organization. Her strategic financial acumen has guided V Group's meteoric rise. Her ability to discern and capitalize on emerging market trends has propelled the company's revenue to soar by over 1,000%, showcasing her unparalleled insights and proactive approach to financial management. As a devoted mother, along with her husband, Ron, she cherishes their young children. Tragically, they lost a twin son just two days after his birth. She has channeled her grief into spearheading a March of Dimes campaign to honor her son's memory. She is a graduate of the College of Charleston.

## KAREEM A SALEM

A formidable litigator with experience at the state and federal levels, he is a nationally recognized cybersecurity and trial lawyer with deep ties in California and San Diego's legal communities, bringing firsthand experience as a national security and cybersecurity prosecutor to clients facing sensitive government investigations, data security incidents of complex litigations across the nation. As a former deputy chief in the U.S. Attorney's office in San Diego, he directed some of the nation's most sensitive investigations in terrorism, espionage, trade secrets, fraud and cybercrimes. He regularly advised teams of federal agents how to investigate and disrupt ongoing threats to the nation's security. Now as a partner at Manatt, he leverages this unique background to provide insightful advice. He earned his BA degree at UC Davis and his law degree at the University of Notre Dame.



## ULRICK MATSUNAGA

He is an associate with Crosbie Gilner Schiffman Southard & Swanson LLP (CGS3), and a core member of the firm's entity formation and tax practice. Focused on providing transactional support to solve complex business challenges and enable varied business objectives, he partners with clients to achieve creative, ethical and balanced solutions. He understands and provides an appreciation of the multi-dimensional complexities of client needs. Prior to joining CGS3, he excelled at Deloitte Consulting LLP, where he advised prestigious clients, including Fortune 100 companies. Recently, he served as a senior operations leader for Sonder Holdings, Inc. a publicly traded hospitality company. He's a published author in several legal journals on the topics of real estate and corporate transparency. He holds a BS degree from Cornell and a Juris Doctor from the University of San Diego.



**Dr. Karen Boyd, Ph.D**

DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH  
POLICY & INNOVATION CENTER (PIC)

Congratulations to Karen – Our stellar economic and workforce researcher doing the work to make San Diego a more equitable place to live, work and thrive!



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Ronson J. Shamoun, Principal Attorney and CEO of RJS LAW, is an Adjunct Law Professor at the University of San Diego—School of Law where he teaches a Tax Practice and Penalties class. He was recently presented with the following awards:

- San Diego Metro Magazine- Best Attorney 2016
- San Diego Magazine- Top Attorney 2016
- San Diego Business Journal- Best of the Bar 2014, 2015 & 2016
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### SARAH AUSTIN

She is a senior account manager at TW2 Marketing. During her 14 years with the award-winning PR and marketing firm, her role has evolved to include the designation of videographer, social media specialist, PR strategist, storyteller and content creator. She's a jack of all trades and a master of all, too. Time and again she has risen to the challenge when the clients' needs have demanded change. She launched TW2's video division and leads the firm's end to end video services, managing the concept development, script writing, videography, editing customized graphics, post-production and promotion of all the videos created. In a latest video project, a collaboration with the Urban Land Institute San Diego-Tijuana, she produced a 30-minute film exploring San Diego's history and how the issues of leadership and diversity have impacted the city's growth and planning. She is a graduate of San Diego State University.



### VICTOR SHLIONSKY

He is a partner at Lavine, Lofgren, Morris & Engelberg LLP., San Diego's largest independent certified public accounting firm. He is a seasoned tax professional with over 16 years of experience. He provides high net-worth individuals and closely held businesses with strategic tax guidance. He specializes in assisting the firm's clients with estate and trust returns, charitable contribution planning and cash flow and business succession needs. Prior to joining LLME, he was a senior tax manager at Moss Adams. He is on the board of directors and finance committee of the San Diego Lawred Family Jewish Community Center. He earned his bachelor's degree in accounting from Loyola Marymount and a master's in taxation from Cal State Northridge.



### SARAH FLOCKEN

She is the founder and chief human chair of SLH Communications, a public relations consulting business which she founded in 2017. She gave it the name SLH -- "sounds like a human" -- and that is the firm's goal in helping its clients in their communications. Her clients range from a major foundation headquartered in Washington, D.C. to healthcare startups in San Diego. She is an expert in advocacy communications. She is an active member of Business for Good San Diego. She hosts Pundemonium! San Diego's Only Pun Competition at Finest City Improv. She performs regularly with two improv comedy groups. She is a volunteer/Certified Therapy Dog handler with Love on a Leash. She is a graduate of Occidental College in Los Angeles with a Master's in Literature and Modernity from the University of Edinburgh UK.



### DOUG SABELLA

He co-founded Payroll Integrations in 2016 to simplify payroll and benefit processes for employers and advance employees' financial wellness in the process. He was working as a product manager at Salesforce with his co-founder at the time. They created technology to automate all of these processes so HR teams could work more efficiently. The company's technology introduces a direct, two-way connection between payroll systems and benefits providers (401k, HAS/FSA), etc.) to automate the process of onboarding employees, updating benefit plans and managing employer/employee contributions. He is a member of Silicon Sands, which connects San Diego-based founders to exchange ideas and advice. He has grown Payroll Integrations to become a pillar of San Diego's startup community. He is a graduate of UC San Diego.



### **DR. TINA NGO BARTEL**

She is the executive director of the San Diego & Imperial Center of Excellence. She leads efforts to improve educational opportunities and job prospects for thousands of people in the San Diego region. The daughter of Vietnamese refugees, she has dedicated her career to helping others achieve their academic and career goals. Her leadership has helped more than 500 instructors and counselors use data and evidence-based practices to create a culture of caring and inclusivity at the region's community colleges. She serves on the board of Civic Communities, and is an alumnus of the Research Advisory Committee for the Kim Center of Social Balance. She is active in community sports and trains weekly in jiu jitsu. She is a graduate of UC San Diego.



### **KAREN BOYD**

She is the director of research for San Diego Regional Policy & Innovation Center, a nonprofit dedicated to solving some of the biggest challenges in the region, such as climate change, lack of affordable housing, community wealth inequities and aging/inefficient infrastructure. PIC has become a leader in conducting equity-centered research and policy analysis, building strong working relationships among San Diego's regional leaders and community stakeholders. She is responsible for developing, executing, and sharing actionable, equity-focused research. Previously, she was an economist at the San Diego Workforce Partnership. She earned her Ph.D from the University of Maryland. She received an MBA from the Rady School of Management at UC San Diego and her bachelor's in business administration from San Diego State University.



### **CHELSEY KAMEN**

She is an accomplished leader at Intesa Communications Group where she manages a diverse portfolio of clients with finesse and strategic insight as a senior account manager. She develops and oversees award-winning multi-faceted campaigns that advance tourism, workforce development, higher education, nonprofits, housing and real estate development initiatives in San Diego. She is a driving force behind Intesa's client success stories, providing invaluable strategic counsel to clients, enhancing their public relations and broader marketing campaigns. Her successes include award-winning campaigns for the San Diego Rescue Mission, the San Diego Workforce Partnership, YMCA of San Diego, SBCS, Diego Parks Foundation, Junior Achievement of San Diego, and Mira Costa College. She is an adjunct professor at Point Loma Nazarene University, and is a lifelong artist and owner of Chelsey Kamen Art. She is a graduate of PLNU.



### **JASON LEE**

At 27, Lee is a multi-family real estate broker and CEO of JLM Real Estate, Inc., a commercial real estate brokerage firm specializing in sales, financing, and 1031 exchanges. He owns and operates a \$10 million real estate portfolio comprising more than one hundred units in San Diego County. He represented over 150 real estate investors, closing \$300 million in deals over five years, and he sold more multi-unit properties in 2021-2022 than any other broker in San Diego. He has a sales team of 16 agents. He started with a net worth of \$500 in 2016, growing it to \$10 million in 2024. Lee was born and raised in South Korea where his father was stationed with the US Army. He earned his real estate license during the summer between his third and fourth year at San Diego State. He uses his podcast platform and social media outlets, from YouTube, Instagram and Tik Tok to reach an audience his competition has not mastered. He is coordinating a plan to expand into L.A. and Orange County. He graduated magna cum laude from San Diego State University.



**AARON ROCKWELL**

He is the Vice President of West Coast Operations for Trident Maritime Systems. He grew the San Diego operation from 100 employees and \$50 million annual revenues in 2017 to 220 employees and \$150 million in revenues in 2024. He manages Trident’s operations in Portland, Seattle and Vancouver BC with more than 250 tradespeople, engineers, managers, planners and supply chain professionals. He is an active member of the San Diego maritime community. He is a graduate of the United States Merchant Marine Academy.

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# Trials and Tribulations from Freelance Worker to Full-time Employee – One Woman's Journey with Advice Added, Too

*SD METRO Associate Editor Douglas Page spoke with Kelly K. James, author of the new book, *The Book That (Almost) Got Me Fired*. She tells a compelling story about going from freelance writer to full-time employee, navigating bosses, younger coworkers, bringing up children, and showing how she made a successful transition – with some advice spiced in, too. This transcript was edited for brevity and clarity.*

## What prompted you to go from freelance writer to full-time employee?

I was ghost-writing, and the work was erratic. I would be very busy on a proposal or very busy with a book, and then an agent or an editor would sit on a project and at one point I had four proposals in the works and none of them sold. If the proposal doesn't sell, you don't have a book contract.

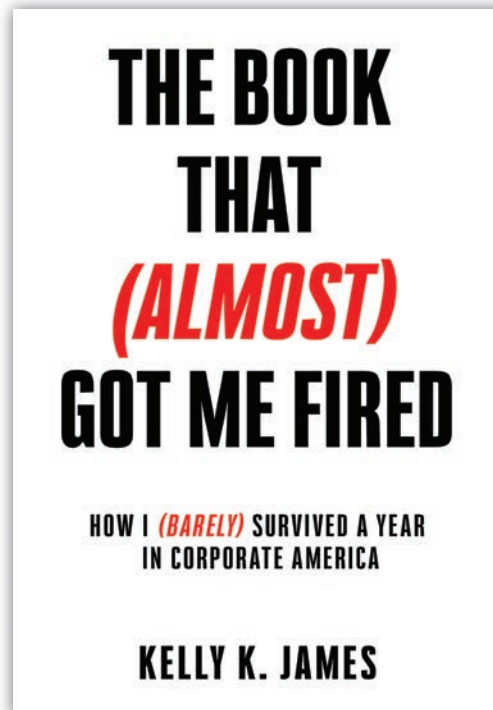
The company was hiring. Plus, it was 3.2 miles from my house. I sent a resume on a whim, got an interview, and they offered me the job. So, I told one of my friends, "You know what? I'm going to go in-house, and I'm going to write about it." I'm going to be like Barbara Ehrenreich writing *Nickel and Dimed*. It's going to be my look at corporate America.

## What was the environment like?

It was a much more casual than I was used to. I'd always worked in law firms. I had worked at Pampered Chef a couple of times, but this was a very, very chill atmosphere. Most of the people wore sweatshirts. I would say about 50% had giant headphones on and it was quiet as a tomb with very little interaction except for the sales guys.

## You write so well about the cultural difference between working for yourself versus working in an office. How big of a shock was it to you to go back to an office after being away for 22 years?

Sitting at a desk all day. I've worked from home for a long time. I get up a lot, take my dog around the block, throw in a load of laundry, get a snack, maybe do some dishes, but I don't have to sit



MSI Press, \$16.55, 230 pages

in one place all the time. And I don't care how progressive your office is, they're not going to be okay with you getting up and leaving every hour to go for a 5- or 10-minute walk.

The first two or three weeks left me exhausted from sitting motionless all day. The other thing was I had to get up, shower, put on adult clothes and be at my desk where, in comparison, and my neighbors will tell you, I walked my dog in my pajama bottoms and a sweatshirt many times because working from home, that's one of the luxuries. You can wear what you want and even if you're on camera, we all have the nice top for the camera and the pajama bottoms on the bottom.

Plus being on someone else's schedule. And I think I would add third as a freelancer, when I know I'm done for the day, I'm done. When you're working in corporate America, you can't

go to your boss at 2 or 2:30 and say, "I'm pretty much done for the day. I'm going home." So, people stay at their desks and look at Facebook or go on Wikipedia or find other ways to waste time.

## One of the things I've seen written, especially on the heels of COVID-19 work from home policies, is that some people can't handle working in an office anymore. Did you see that?

I didn't, but that's because I call myself an extrovert in an introvert's job. I had dinner recently with two of the women I used to work with at the company. My friend Elaine was saying I was the only person in the office who said, "Good morning, good morning."

People responded, but no one was super friendly. And then I realized, "Oh, they don't want to have a conversation. They're just in the nook to get their coffee and sit down."

As a creative professional, I'm much more efficient and effective if you let me work from home. I can get much more done. And then there's always going to be some people who say, "Well, we want you in the office because we want to brainstorm and we want facilitate this."

There's some value in that. When I onboarded with my current company, I went to Atlanta for four days and met all the people at the office. It's easier to connect after you've met someone in person. If you always work from home, it is a skill you need to have in case you return to the office.

**It sounds like you were worried your social skills were deteriorating.**

Social skills are important and connection like actual connection is important whether you're at the office or in your relationships or just talking to somebody at the coffee shop or talking to my neighbors when I'm walking my dog.

**You took what seemed to be a rather low starting salary.**

I was offered \$35,000 and I said, "I can't do that. I mean, I've got two kids." They came back with \$45,000, which was less than what I wanted, but again, I took on the job - to get the health insurance and write about it.

And I still had a book under contract that I had to write so that income was going to come in. And then I knew I was still going to freelance, so I could still do it. Everything's a trade-off. When you choose option A, you're saying no to option B.

**Millennials come under fire for all sorts of reasons, and I'm not here to take a view on them one way or another, but how would you describe them in the workplace compared to maybe other generations you've known whether it's the Baby Boomers or Generation X?**

The office was mostly Millennials. I don't think Gen Z was there yet. But as someone in her fifties, I thought, "They're not going to like me or they're going to call me grandma." I was more concerned about working with them in the sense of, "Will they accept me?" Not, "Oh no, I have to work with Millennials."

Millennials are great. And I think it comes down to attitude. The sales guys were Millennials. The SEO guys were Millennials. I would go over there with my coffee cup and say, "Hey, I got questions. I don't understand why we can't use the plural keyword. I don't understand this. Can you explain this to me? Can you help me with this?"

As we get older, there's more of a resistance by people to admit what they don't know. I have never had a problem saying I don't know how to do something, or I don't get it, or can you explain this? I typically couch it in terms of, "Here's what I've done. I looked at this and this, and I still have questions."

So, you're not asking for someone to spoon-feed you. I think we all need to let go of those preconceived notions of, "Okay, Boomers or Millennials are this or Gen Z is this," and just focus on people as individuals.

**I spoke with somebody (San Diego State University Professor Jean Twenge) who said something similar. One of the things that Millennials have done well is improving life in the workplace. They won't stand for conditions our grandparents or parents went through.**

What I see is a better work-life balance. Pretty much everyone I know has something they're passionate about in their life. It's not their job. It's something else. And the other part of that, too, is I work with several people in their mid-twenties to early thirties at my current job, and they are confident. These women are confident in a way I was not confident in my twenties and maybe not even until my thirties.

And especially for women, I think that's empowering. I get irritated when people are, "Oh, they're special snowflakes." Partly because I don't think that's the truth and partly because I'm raising two people in this generation, and I don't want them to whitewash my whole generation with whatever they think we are.

One of the best questions to ask is, "What'd you do this weekend?" or "What's something you're really excited about?" I play eight-ball on Thursday nights and last week, I think she's 27 or 28, and we're talking and a B-52s song came on and I was like, "Oh, I actually saw them in concert. They're one of my favorite bands." She's like, "They're one of my favorite bands." I'm like, "You know the B-52s?" When you look for bridges, you find out you have more in common than you think.

**How did it go over when you told the kids, "I've taken this job"?**

They were more concerned with whether the job was going to change our lives. And once they knew that it wasn't, they were fine with it. They were 10 and 5 years old.

**You spend a lot of time talking about your boss, Frank. What was he like?**

In a different situation, we could have been friends. He was someone who couldn't completely trust the people who worked for him. And I'm someone who does not do very well in a micromanagement situation. He was demanding. Could be fair. I did learn quite a bit about my job from him and about interacting with people at the company.

But one of the things he said to me was, "The company hasn't had somebody like you before. You ask all these questions and most of the people here just want to come and do their jobs and go home." And I said, "I just want to understand how all the different pieces fit together." I think it was more like I was a round peg going into a square hole.

**It would seem that writing outlines for reclaimed wood**

**furniture companies, basketball camps, aircraft refurbishing companies could get monotonous. How did you make it interesting?**

Some parts of a job you just can't make interesting. Doug, I'm sorry. I'm just a big believer in to-do lists. And some of the clients were actually really fun to write about and write for, and some were not. Compressed Air Systems was one of the ones where I was like, "I know nothing about this." A manufacturer that made ball bearings. I mean, I like writing about health and wellness and service journalism, but depending on the day, I always had my to-do list. And I would put the worst task first. I'm a big believer in eliminate the ugliest, do the thing you most don't want to do first, not necessarily the hardest thing, the thing you don't want to do, and just kind of tick them off the list.

And then if I had a client that I really liked writing for, maybe that's my mid-morning break. But again, coming from a freelance background, sometimes you're writing for clients or writing about subjects you love to write about, and sometimes you're not. That's the job that's being a professional writer.

**You're at the office and you come across someone who's got the big title. And yet as you sit there, talk to them, you realize, "Gee, I might be old enough to be their -- dare I say it? - mother"? Was that a shocking moment or did you just roll with it?**

The partners were pretty much in my age group. We probably grew up listening to the same bands. But then the next level down, there were a fair number of people who probably could have been my kid. But again, at the company I work for now, our CEO, I don't even think he's 40. He's a wunderkind, but we speak the same language.

One of the good things about going back to work in your 50s, if you have an open attitude and you understand smart people come in every age, you can connect with somebody. I've worked for people much younger than me, and it's never been an issue. I'm not going to say, "You know, I'm old enough to be your mother." I can think that, but I'm not going to let it play out in my demeanor.

**What did you like most about the job?**

Connecting with people. I listened to the sales guys, asked them questions, and they came to understand that I was truly interested, so I was able to learn a lot from them. We had many processes, one in particular where it was a certain kind of content that we were sending out to writers, and I suggested to my boss we could do this ourselves because it was just inserting keywords into existing content. It wasn't expanding the page and it wasn't writing an entirely new page, we call them reworks. And in the world of SEO, you basically take existing content and you put the keywords in the existing content. So it is kind of like a little puzzle where you have this piece of content, where are we going to put the keyword, where does it fit?

And I suggested this process and it was okay, and it saved our department a lot of money. Plus, it gave me and Alyssa another project to work on. I like developing efficiencies.

I also loved being put on client calls when we had a new one because I'm a former ghostwriter and journalist. So when we were on the call, I would say, "Tell me what you want in terms of your content. Who's your customer? Who's your client?" And then I would write up my notes and share them with everyone who was working with that client. No one had done that before.

**It seems where you relished those moments the most because it provided you with a deeper understanding of the clients.**

It did. It was an acknowledgement that we're humans. I remember this one client didn't want to use the word elderly and I agreed. Being able to talk with her about it was much better than, "Here's why we're using this keyword" and just that acknowledgement of humanity, and also the acknowledgement that when someone tells me, "This is what I want," I can say, I hear you, and okay, the owner of your company does not use contractions. That to me is a little different. I use them all the time, but it's in our notes. So, I think that's very valuable, and people want to be heard, listened to and understood.

**What did you like least about the job?**

Having to be there. I pushed immediately to be able to work from home two days a week. And then I got them to agree to three days. And I mean, I was pushing for five days a week, and then we got COVID.

**Was work-life balance better at home or at the office?**

Work-life balance is a myth. Nobody can ever achieve it for longer than two or three days in a row, and then it goes by the wayside. The biggest challenge was being chained to my desk for 8-1/2 hours a day. When you're freelancing and working from home, you can go to the store at noon or take your child to the doctor or all the little things, which I call "Life Work" – getting the dry cleaning, changing the oil in the car. Now I have to do them not during the day because I'm at work. I have to do them when a lot of other people do them.

Nobody wants to go to the grocery store at 4:30 or 5 p.m. You're tired, hungry, and buy all the bad food. It was really important for me to cook dinner every night for my kids, but I gave up on that after two or three months.

**You list why it's important not to piss off your boss. Did you piss him off frequently?**

I did. I'll give an example. This idea of me being on the client calls, I had suggested this early on. I said, "Wouldn't it be great if we had somebody from our department to be on these client calls at the outset? That way that person could find out what they want



with content and then we wouldn't get clients unhappy with the content we're producing."

And my boss said, "We don't have anyone in the department to do that." And I said, "I could do it. I'd be happy to do it." Well, he said no. So I thought it was a good idea. So I went over his head and I went to the VP and suggested this idea, because I haven't worked in corporate America for 22 years. So that was the kind of employee I was, and he was not happy with that kind of action, and they decided to put me on the client calls. And when he told me that, I couldn't resist saying, "This is what I suggested." To be fair, I think there were issues on both sides of the relationship.

**When you went back to corporate America, it sounds like there were a lot of coordination issues with your ex-husband. Did you two work well together when it came to the kids?**

We did. I talked to Eric before I took the job. He was very flexible and very supportive. I think he worked from home pretty much exclusively at that point, but sometimes he had to travel. So when he traveled for work then, and if it was during his time, the kids were still with me and we were very flexible, and we had a dog that went back and forth, and our cat went back and forth. I can't imagine not having that kind of co-parenting relationship.

**Tell me about the approach you took to getting a raise.**

I started talking about a raise having been there for a month or two, which probably wasn't smart. I did ask for a raise at six months because I recall during the interview that my boss said I was taking much less money than I wanted, and he said I could bring it up at six months.

So, when I did, I had put together a two-page letter that said, "Here are all the things I've done. I came up with this new process and that saved our department about \$5,700. I was hired to do outlines, but I'm doing all these other tasks and I'm on these calls", and I tried to show my value in terms of, "This is what I have brought. This job was paying \$45,000, but this is actually what I'm doing, so I should be paid more."

And they said no. I wasn't happy. I did get a raise at the end of the year and continued at that company for another year and a half and received more raises.

**What prompted you to leave?**

I didn't want to be the director of content, and that was the only job that was above me in the content department. I also wanted a little more freedom and flexibility. I found a position with a Swedish company that was remote. So that's where I ended up going.

**When you think about everything that you went through**

**professionally and personally, what was the biggest thing you learned about yourself?**

When you start a new job, it's stressful. You don't know the people. You don't know who you can trust. You don't know how to do the job. And you may not know how to log on to get into the spreadsheet. You don't know who you're going to be friends with. You don't know the relationships. You come in cold.

It made me realize who I was. I had this idea that, "I'm a freelancer, I'm a freelancer first and foremost", that I had these skills that could translate into the workplace. And maybe I didn't have to be a freelancer, but I still felt like a freelancer on the inside. I was proud of myself for taking the challenge and wanted to quit many times but didn't because I promised myself I would stay a year.

At the end of the year, I got an okay raise, and I was like, "Well, I guess I'll stay for another year." I was proud of putting myself in uncomfortable situations instead of being afraid to.

**It sounds like you discovered you're far more resilient than you expected.**

Thank you. That's my answer, Doug.

**These days you've got a lot of women and men who have worked at home, stayed at home. What's the best piece of advice you can give in terms of having done what you have done and then going back to the full-time gig at the office?**

Decide what your absolutes are. I gave up the idea that I'm going to make dinner every night. It was causing too much stress. But one of my absolutes, maybe three to five mornings a week, I would go to the Y and work out before I went to work.

I have very good friendships, and staying connected to friends helped me tremendously. At lunchtime, I would walk around the corporate area where our company was and call one of my friends and vent for 15 or 20 minutes. I think maintaining relationships is important. It's super helpful to have people who are already in corporate America because your freelance friends are probably not going to understand what you're doing.

**And that way you've got some people you can bounce ideas off of or learn ways to strategically negotiate what you're going through.**

When I went over Frank's head with that idea, and I told a couple of my friends who work in corporate America, they were like, "You did what?" I was like, "I didn't know." "You never do that. You never go over your boss's head." I was like, "I know now."

Thank you, Kelly.



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# Congratulations

to our CFO, **Allegra Morabito**,  
on being named one of San Diego's Top  
40 Under 40 by SD METRO Magazine.



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# Lagging revenue continues to drive California budget deficit as deadline nears

By Dan Walters | CalMatters



Construction of the annex at the state Capitol in Sacramento on April 29, 2024. Photo by Miguel Gutierrez Jr., CalMatters

As the June 15 constitutional deadline for enacting a 2024-25 state budget approaches, the good news for Gov. Gavin Newsom is that all-important income tax revenues in April slightly exceeded the administration's \$16.3 billion assumption.

Even so, the bad news is that overall revenues from income, sales and corporate taxes are still running \$6 billion behind what Newsom's January budget projected for the current fiscal year, meaning that cumulative deficit will be substantially more than the \$38 billion Newsom's proposed budget assumed. But how much more?

The Legislature's budget analyst, Gabe Petek, has estimated that the cumulative deficit for the three-year "budget window" – 2022-23, 2023-24 and 2024-25 – to be \$73 billion, largely due to his more pessimistic revenue calculations. Newsom's January budget assumes that revenues are running \$44 billion under last year's budget projections during the three-year window, while Petek raises that estimate to \$68 billion.

With revenue shortfalls driving the state's deficit number – whatever it might be – everyone involved in the annual budget process was closely monitoring what April 15's income tax filing deadline would produce.

Newsom even indefinitely postponed his annual state of the state address because of the uncertainty. Governors usually try to strike upbeat themes in such addresses and that would be

particularly difficult this year.

With the month's revenue numbers now known, the next phase will be Newsom unveiling a revised budget later this month, setting the stage for several weeks of intensive – and secretive – negotiations between the governor and legislative leaders. The revised budget proposal, and the budget that emerges from negotiations, will be balanced on paper. That is, projected revenues and projected spending – \$291.4 billion in the January budget – will be matched.

However, neither will be balanced in the true sense of the word, because the revenues will include at least \$12 billion from the state's emergency reserves, many billions more in loans from special funds and some accounting gimmickry.

Nor will the June 15 budget be the final spending plan for the 2024-25 fiscal year, any more than the current 2023-24 budget is what Newsom and legislators enacted last June. They have already made billions of dollars in changes in response to stubbornly subpar revenues, trying to get a jump on the state's chronic gap between income and outgo.

The situation is a sticky wicket, to use an old-fashioned term from the sport of cricket, for the countless interest groups that depend on money from the budget. Even with the injection of money from reserves, the spending side of the budget will have to be trimmed, although by how much and from what programs are still guesswork at this stage.

Budget stakeholders are jockeying for position on the priority list with private lobbying of legislators and public pronouncements of vital need.

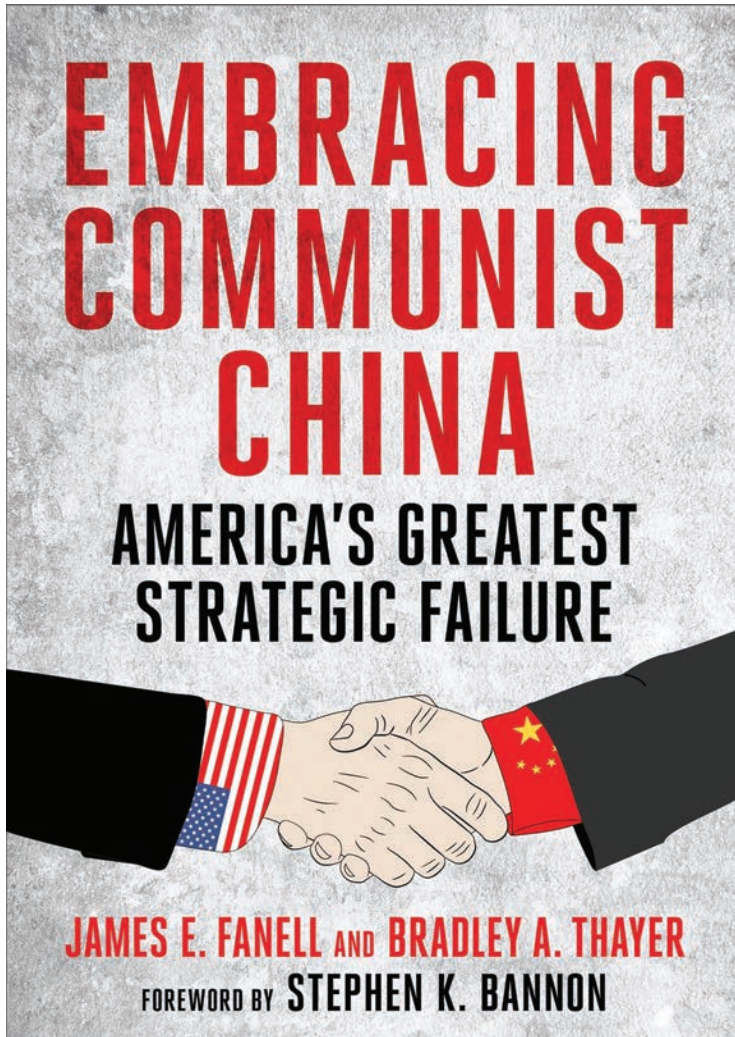
In theory, there's another way Newsom and legislators could truly balance the budget and satisfy those clamoring for money – by raising taxes. Both of Newsom's last two predecessors, Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger and Democrat Jerry Brown, faced deficits of comparable magnitude and both won legislative or voter approval of tax increases to close their gaps.

Left-leaning legislators have proposed tax increases and one might think that Newsom, who is ideologically to the left of both former governors, would be willing to embrace that solution.

However, Newsom has publicly shunned tax increases, apparently concerned that they might drive more high-income taxpayers or corporations out of the state, but perhaps because a tax hike would also undercut his strenuous efforts to raise his national political standing.



# Embracing Communist China: America's Greatest Strategic Failure



War Room Books, Skyhorse Publishing, \$26.99, 178 pages

To learn more about tensions between the United States and the People's Republic of China, watch SD METRO Associate Editor Douglas Page's interview with retired U.S. Navy Captain James Fanell and Dr. Bradely Thayer, published at [sandiegometro.com](http://sandiegometro.com). They wrote a book, *Embracing Communist China: America's Greatest Strategic Failure*, writing that many U.S. presidential administrations, both Democrat and Republican, misread Beijing's ambitions, allowing it to become what it is today, a sizable threat to the United States and its allies. Capt. Fanell is a 29-year veteran of the U.S. Navy. He was the director of intelligence and information operations of the Pacific Fleet. Dr. Thayer is a founding member of the Committee on Present Danger China. They discuss the magnitude of the risk as they see it, U.S. strengths, China's military abilities, and what the United States and its allies will face should Taiwan, also known as the Republic of China, fall to a possible Beijing-led military assault..

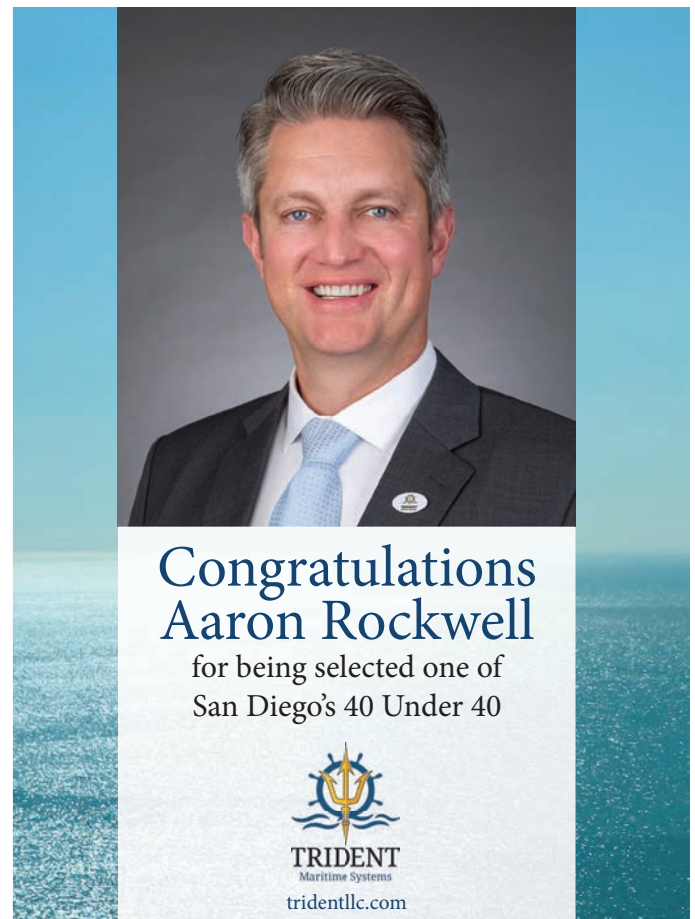


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# Beijing's long arm – The attempt to control Chinese diaspora and dissidents worldwide

By Douglas Page

More than 100 secret Chinese police stations across the world, including one in Los Angeles, harasses and intimidates its dissidents, attempting to silence them from speaking out against the Beijing government and the ruling Chinese Communist Party.

While that might not surprise anyone tracking authoritarian governments, what might boggle many is that no U.S. entities in law enforcement or diplomacy would discuss the issue in detail.

Information about these police stations, including their locations, comes from Safeguard Defenders, a human rights organization in Spain, that tracks Fox Hunt, an operation run by the People's Republic of China to control and, sometimes, return its dissidents to face legal proceedings.

One of these police stations, in New York, was recently closed and two people were arrested by the Federal Bureau of Investigation for failing to register as foreign agents. The Associated Press reported that while the police stations can be helpful – such as assisting Chinese citizens in renewing their Chinese driver's licenses – it can also have a “sinister” function – “helping the Chinese government locate pro-democracy activists of Chinese descent.”

“This goes hand in hand with China's attempt to establish supreme control over the ethnic Chinese diaspora around the world, regardless of citizenship,” Safeguard Defenders Director Peter Dahlin told SD METRO. “China doesn't care about citizenship.”

“China considers anyone who's ethnically Chinese to be under their mandate. It doesn't matter if they're in or outside of China,” he added.

The 102 police stations, in more than 50 countries, including some in the U.S.'s leading allies, Australia, Canada, Japan, and the United Kingdom, aren't run by a Chinese national police force, says Dahlin. Instead, they're outposts for the police from four Chinese cities, Qingtian, Fuzhou, Nantong, and Wenzhou.

In addition to being discreet – often placed within the confines of a Chinese cultural or trade association – they're rarely disclosed to the host country in which they operate, he says.

“They will ask those associations to help them target and harass people they want returned to China,” Dahlin said. “A lot of these cultural associations around the world are being co-opted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).”

The police station in Los Angeles, Dahlin says, is from Wenzhou. The one in New York was run by Fuzhou.

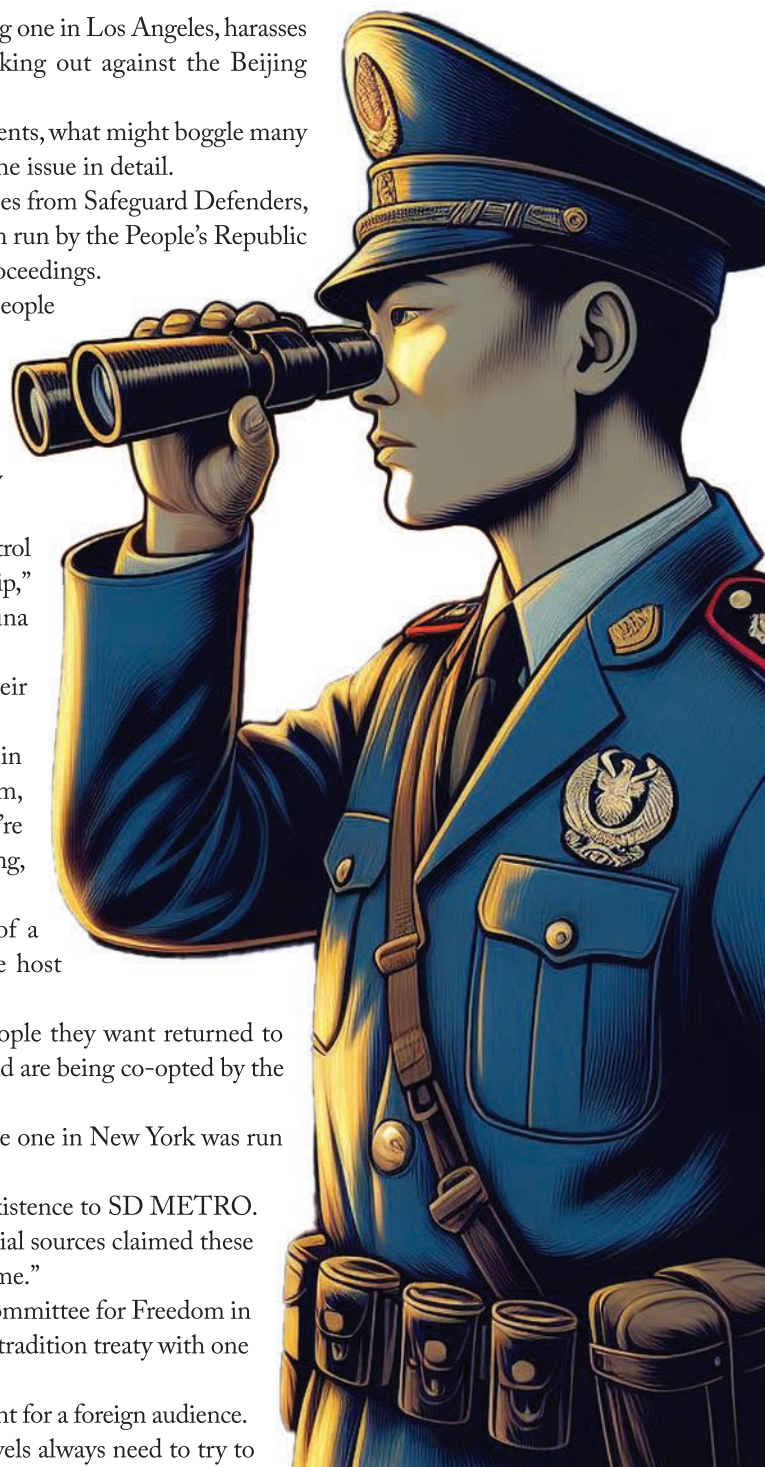
The Los Angeles Police Department wouldn't confirm the station's existence to SD METRO.

As for the success of these police outposts, Dahlin said, “Chinese official sources claimed these police stations have helped return 84 people to face legal issues back home.”

It's unknown if any came from the United States. According to the Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation, China and the United States do not have an extradition treaty with one another.

Safeguard Defenders bases its information on Chinese sources not meant for a foreign audience.

“The structural hierarchy of power in China is such that the lower levels always need to try to



## Life under U.S. asylum: One Hong Konger's story

Twenty-four-year-old Hong Kong native Frances Hui, a graduate of Emerson College in Boston, lives in the United States - a place she never planned to be.

"I had no plans to work in the United States or stay here," she said. "The reason I left Hong Kong is because I was told by multiple sources I was a target under the National Security Law (NSL)."

Because she met with members of Congress, urging support for legislation affirming U.S. support for human rights and democracy in Hong Kong, she violated a key component of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) NSL: Chinese citizens, including Hong Kong ones, are forbidden from engaging with foreign governments.

The U.S. law, signed by President Trump in 2019, supported the PRC's commitments to maintain Hong Kong's government and rights, as they were before Great Britain returned the territory to the PRC, for 50 years, until 2047.

Today, the Hong Kong government is so concerned about Hui, it placed a \$130,000 bounty on her, equivalent to about HK\$1 million, for lobbying for the legislation that Trump signed.

"(The bounty) is an incentive for people around the world to harass us and send us threats," Hui said. "Even before the bounty was issued, I received death threats and harassments online."

Hui also coordinated rallies on behalf of Hong Kong's democracy, as it existed under British rule, which made her a target of the territory's government.

"With that background, I was told I would be affected under the NSL. I was told I should think about whether I wanted to stay, get arrested or leave Hong Kong," she said. "I applied for asylum (to the United States).

She received it in six months, which, Hui said, "is uncommon.

"There are people who have applied

for asylum and have been waiting for years - and still haven't heard back," she continued.

None of Hui's anti-Hong Kong government activities happened back home.

"Organizations and businesses can also be under threat by the NSL," she said. "It transcends citizenship status and borders. If someone criticizes the Hong Kong government, they're a target."

Hong Kong's legislative council passed Article 23 in March, which, Hui says, places another layer on top of the NSL, and, as a result, she could be jailed for more than 20 years.

Posters for her arrest were put up throughout Hong Kong.

"I have friends who have taken pictures (of these posters)," she told SD METRO. "They're not just at the airport, they're also on government buildings, on bridges - everywhere. It sends a chilling message to people in Hong Kong."

Hui said there's a tradition in Hong Kong, where if someone doesn't like another person, they hit their picture and curse them.

"I received videos of these things with my face on the picture," she said.

In addition, Hui says, there's so much fear, friends in Hong Kong have unfriended her on Facebook.

"They're scared," Hui said. "I don't blame them."

Returning to Hong Kong

Today, Hui lives in the Washington DC area and works for the Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation as its policy and advocacy coordinator.

She'd prefer to be in Hong Kong.

"I love the city," Hui said when asked about her affection for Hong Kong. "It's dazzling. If I had a choice, I would never have left.

"In fact, I didn't know

how much I loved Hong Kong until I left," she added.

But there's only one way she's going back.

"The Chinese Communist Party has to go down," Hui said. "Even if the Chinese government said, 'Oh, we're going to solve all the repression in Hong Kong. We're going to revoke all the arrest warrants. Hong Kong can return to what it was before (the 1997 handover) and enjoy a high degree of autonomy, but still be part of us. They have to listen to us.'

"I wouldn't trust that because China has never kept all of its promises. I would only go back if the Chinese Communist Party is no longer the ruling party," she added.

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impress their superiors,” Dahlin said. “The way to do that is to issue glowing reports of their work, including controlling the overseas diaspora, is inside the local police bulletin board or some local newspaper that is intended and read by CCP officials in that region or province.”

The U.S. State Department didn’t return SD METRO emails seeking comment about the issue; according to one published report, from *The Economist* magazine, China never seeks permission to open these police stations.

Even though they arrested people at the secret Chinese police station in New York, the FBI wouldn’t confirm the existence of the one in Los Angeles. Instead, it emailed the same statement it issued last time SD METRO asked for comment about Chinese dissidents, saying, “We’re increasingly conducting outreach to raise awareness of how some countries’ governments harass and intimidate their own citizens living in the U.S. This violates U.S. law and individual rights and freedoms and will not be tolerated.”

Besides Safeguard Defenders, only one other party involved in the issue replied at length to SD METRO’s inquiries – China.

“Fighting cross-border crimes, repatriating corrupt fugitives, and recovering illegal proceeds are a just cause widely recognized by the international community. In pursuing international cooperation in this field, Chinese law-enforcement authorities strictly abide by international law, fully respect other countries’ laws and judicial sovereignty, and protect the lawful rights and interests of the suspects, which is fully justified and legitimate,” said Liu Pengyu, the Chinese Embassy spokesman in Washington, in an email.

“China adheres to the principle of non-interference in other countries’ internal affairs, strictly observes international laws and respects the judicial sovereignty of all countries. We have made it clear many times that there are no ‘overseas police stations,’” he added.

“The relevant sites were established to assist Chinese citizens who are unable to return to their country during the pandemic to apply for physical examination services when their Chinese driver’s licenses expired. The sites were provided by local Chinese communities. The volunteer service personnel are all local Chinese, not police officers. They did not engage in any activities that violate U.S. laws. As the pandemic situation changes, relevant service stations have been closed,” Pengyu continued.

### History of Chinese Dissidents

Fox Hunt is no surprise when viewed in the context of Chinese history, experts say.

“The Chinese Revolution in 1911 that overthrew the Qing Dynasty was quite heavily funded by people overseas,” said Ian Johnson, a China expert at the New York-based Council of Foreign Relations.

Sun Zhongshan, sometimes referred to as Sun Yat-sen, who helped topple the Dynasty in 1911 and replace it with a Republic of China, traveled the world – to Hawaii, Singapore, and Europe –

he said, raising money for the revolution.

As worrisome as today’s dissidents might be to Beijing, much of their concern has to do with how the government and the CCP are seen at home.

Competence is the reigning issue, said Timothy Heath, a defense researcher with the Santa Monica, Calif.-based RAND Corporation.

“(Chinese) expats only got traction because the government they opposed, the Qing Dynasty, was so corrupt and ineffective that it was very vulnerable to widespread protest,” he said. “It’s not a coincidence that the Chinese government today has become more concerned about these individuals in a time when Beijing’s performance is disappointing.”

While the latest numbers show China’s economy growing faster in this year’s first quarter compared to a year ago, Beijing worries about its overseas dissidents remains heightened.

“People are becoming more and more dissatisfied,” Heath said. “So that makes for a much more volatile domestic political situation, which is why (Beijing) cares so much about dissident voices.”

Said Johnson: “People under 40 – who likely don’t recall the Tiananmen Square protests – are encountering the first sustained series of problems in their lifetime.”

Between the 1990s and the first two decades of the 21st century, he said, China’s economy grew, on average, about 9% a year.

“So, if you’re living in that kind of an environment, you have opportunities. There’s not a lot of reason to doubt the government,” Johnson said.

But economic woes, plus the “botched response” to COVID-19 – including lockdowns and requiring people to wear masks while the rest of the world opened – “caused a lot of people to doubt the party’s ability to manage the country,” he said, especially during a worldwide televised sporting event.

The World Cup, held between November and December 2022, elevated those uncertainties.

“People could see all these fans in the stadiums without masks, and they’re like, ‘Why are we still wearing masks? Why can’t we go to a stadium?’ That caused a lot of protests and unhappiness, and I think the whole economy also, especially for young people, has been destructive,” Johnson said.

As to whether today’s dissidents could overthrow the CCP or the government, Heath and Johnson say it’s doubtful.

“The government is way too entrenched, and although there is discontent, there is not the level of crisis in China like there was in the late Qing Dynasty,” Heath said. “The goal (from the most vocal dissidents) isn’t to overthrow the CCP. The threat they pose is to the CCP narrative.

“They’re claiming Chinese can have perspectives, values and political ideals that are different from the CCP,” he continued.

If their ideas were accepted by large swaths of China’s population, Heath said, problems could emerge.

“The spread of opposing political worldviews could lead if not to

the overthrow at least the destabilization of CCP rule,” he said.

These police outposts, Dahlin says, have another job, too.

“Sometimes they try to force them back to China,” he said. “When that’s not possible, they harass and intimidate them. It’s for a political purpose – to ensure they’re silenced.”

According to The Economist magazine, about 10.5 million Chinese born in mainland China live outside of the country. According to another published report, from the United States Air Force, the number rises to 60 million if their descendants are included.

“Many of them read and write in Chinese,” Heath said. “They have political views, and very few are clones of the CCP.”

Adds Dahlin: “The number of people leaving China has increased dramatically since (the current CCP general secretary) Xi Jinping came to power. Last year, more Chinese people sought asylum around the world than in the 10 years his predecessor, Hu Jintao, was the CCP general secretary. It’s becoming important for the CCP to control this group.”

During the Hu Jintao era, about 160,000 people left China compared to, so far, more than 700,000 during Xi Jinping’s time as the CCP’s general secretary, Safeguard Defenders says.

The organization says the information is from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, which, when asked, didn’t answer SD METRO’s emails seeking confirmation about the numbers.

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# “Devastating” wait times at Mexico border strain California small businesses

By Wendy Fry | CalMatters



El Rincon restaurant in the San Ysidro neighborhood of San Diego on April 16, 2024. The restaurant is one of several businesses that has been affected by recent closures at the U.S.-Mexico border. Photo by Adriana Heldiz, CalMatters

Government agencies are spending billions of dollars to improve wait times at the U.S.-Mexico border, but the checkpoints remain severely clogged — and border communities are hurting.

In recent months lines at the border often stretched for several hours, frustrating more than 150,000 students, cross-border families, health care workers, small business owners, and others who daily cross to and from Mexico. Experts say some *fronterizas* have stopped crossing the border as often, and the loss of foot traffic in the region has resulted in heavy sales losses for small businesses.

“Money we can replace, but time will never come back. Those people are wasting their time in that line,” said Sunil Gakherja, 49, who owns a small perfume store in San Ysidro, a neighborhood in San Diego, close to the border.

U.S. border officials point to the need to shift resources to handle irregular migration — people who come into the United States in places other than official ports of entry, usually to seek asylum. San Diego surpassed Tucson this month as Border Patrol’s busiest sector in the nation.

But border-area residents and business leaders say the federal government should staff the border effectively so that the \$741-million expansion of the San Ysidro Port of Entry has its intended impact, to reduce wait times and stimulate the regional economy.

Research published by the Atlantic Council says a 10-minute reduction in wait times could lead to an additional \$26 million

worth of cargo entering the United States each month and an annual impact of \$5.4 million on the U.S. economy from purchases by families and individuals entering the United States from Mexico.

In the San Diego region, regular border crossers say wait times are going up, not down. Waits that used to last 30 minutes to an hour on weekdays can now regularly take three to four hours. On several days last December, pedestrians waited six hours or more. Adding to their frustration, long lines also stretch southbound to enter Mexico.

“Devastating” is how Kenia Zamarripa described the waits on both sides of the border. She is vice president of international and public affairs at the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce.

“This is families losing their incomes,” she said. “There are 800 small businesses in San Ysidro that depend on pedestrian crossings and, again, 90% of their customers cross on foot.”

State officials said it’s unclear how much California has missed out on in sales tax revenue because that information can’t be broken down by zip code.

## Small border businesses suffering

After opening in 2017, the El Rincon restaurant in San Ysidro faced the same challenges and growing pains many small, family-run businesses contend with, said Andrea Alaniz. Her mom owns the Mexican food restaurant along San Ysidro Boulevard, a few blocks



from the border.

“We just opened the doors, and it was just us doing the cooking and waiting tables — hoping that business would increase and keep on a nice trend,” she recalled.

Word quickly spread of her mother’s caseros — homemade family recipes from Guadalajara, Jalisco. Lines would wrap around the tiny restaurant, with some customers even driving from Los Angeles or crossing north from Baja California, for the food.

“You know, the spices ... you can find the spices anywhere, but really, it’s the way my mom and my family cooks,” said Alaniz. “My mom’s an amazing cook, and our recipes ... they go way back.”

The whole family — five siblings — pitched in to handle the increased volume and their newfound success.

“We all work here,” laughed Alaniz. “It was a Sunday, and I remember we were all here, and the music was blaring, and we were just dancing and having fun and it was a really nice feeling.”

Then the pandemic hit. Federal officials restricted cross-border travel. Business tanked. About 200 businesses closed in San Ysidro, a working-class, mostly immigrant community of about 25,000 people, said Jason Wells, president of the local chamber of commerce.

“Shut their doors forever. Gone,” he said.

Alaniz and her family managed to stay open and even sent some money home to family in Mexico, but it was a daily fight. “We just don’t get the same amount of people coming in, because



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Andrea Alaniz at El Rincon, her family's restaurant, in the San Ysidro neighborhood of San Diego on April 16, 2024. The restaurant is one of several businesses that has been affected by recent closures at the U.S.-Mexico border. Photo by Adriana Heldiz, CalMatters

people aren't going back and forth anymore," said Alaniz.

Multiple studies show immigrants like Alaniz's family were a key economic engine for the United States' rebound from the pandemic. Some 50% of the labor market's recent growth came from foreign-born workers between January 2023 and January 2024, according to an Economic Policy Institute analysis of federal data.

Zamarripa says it's these same border communities that lose about \$2 billion yearly because of excessive border wait times. She worries the latest bottlenecks at checkpoints could severely impact those struggling to get back on their feet.

Gakherja, the owner of the perfumery, described a Sunday customer who waited six hours to cross the border.

"He got in the line at 9 in the morning, and he got here at 3:30 p.m. It's too much. Imagine they have kids who have to go to the restroom. They need food. They're not thinking about shopping after that," said Gakherja.

It's not just small businesses that are hurting. Those hardest hit by backlogs at inefficient ports of entry include the region's hospitality and hospital workers, students, medical patients, and anyone who relies on the interdependence of a cross-border region to offset the skyrocketing costs of living in San Diego, one of the most expensive cities in the nation.

Hector Urquiza, a 19-year-old college student serving in the Army Reserves, lives with his brother in Tijuana because rent is too expensive in San Diego.

"When I had to go to work, there was a two-hour line. It was like a snake, you know, wiggling around. That was kind of painful," said Urquiza.

Cross-border travelers often turn to Facebook to document their experiences and wait times because the official Customs and Border Protection data is considered inaccurate and unreliable. *Cómo está la línea Tijuana* (How is the Tijuana line), a Facebook group with 430,000 members, was founded in June 2013 when its creator relied on the official CBP wait times and was extraordinarily late for work, according to his posts.



Sunil Gakherja, owner of Sunny Perfumes, in the San Ysidro neighborhood of San Diego on April 16, 2024. Photo by Adriana Heldiz, CalMatters

Urquiza said people who regularly cross the border develop a system. It sometimes includes holding a spot in line for each other to cut down on their day-to-day commute, but Tijuana authorities recently have cracked down on the practice, making it harder to get through the school or work week.

"Like you can tell somebody to save your spot, but when you try to go back to your spot, the police are like, 'Nah, no amigo,'" he said.

When commuters wait in border traffic for hours, business productivity across Southern California suffers, say local leaders.

"As a business owner, you can't expect an employee to perform at 100% if he has four hours of sleep and then six hours on foot," said Joaquín Luken, executive director of the Smart Border Coalition, which aims to streamline border crossings.

Wait times averaged three hours to get back into Mexico in mid-March, he said.

"You have a complete shift of the profile of a crosser," said Luken.

Before, people would cross to shop, eat, or visit. But now, border crossings are strictly business—people who need to cross for school, work, or care for a family member.

"So, of course, most of the businesses here in the South Bay are struggling, and this impact does trickle up the county," he said of San Diego County.

Reece Rackley, a 30-year-old who lives in Clairemont, crosses the border to see a doctor in Baja California to save money on medical care. She's one of roughly 1 million Americans who travel to Mexico yearly to save on health care.

Waiting in long lines to return home can be "very, very frustrating," she said.

Victor Navarro, 27, a social worker and student at San Diego City College, recently broke down crying when asked about the long waits.

"I've lost at least two or three years of my life in that line," said Navarro, who lives in the La Postal neighborhood of Tijuana.

"Why is that happening? Do they hate us? Do they want us to be standing there in line? Are they humiliating us?" asked Navarro.

**Does the U.S.-Mexico border need to be this way?**

As President Joe Biden worked to salvage a border deal with Congress in January, he said he would “shut down” the U.S.-Mexico border. His words echoed former President Donald Trump, who threatened in 2019 to close the border if Mexico didn’t step up its immigration enforcement.

People in the Cali-Baja region wish officials in Washington would stop saying that.

“Number one, you can’t close a border,” said Luken. “Especially when you look at Mexico being the U.S.’s number one trading partner.” One in every 29 workers in the United States has a job created or supported by U.S.-Mexico trade, the 2022 Atlantic Council study shows.

On Monday, many commuters woke at 1 a.m. to get into a four-hour line. When they finally arrived at the checkpoint just before dawn, they found less than a third of Customs and Border Protection’s available booths were open. Some wondered aloud whether the traffic nightmare wasn’t just a slow-moving demonstration of Washington’s threats.

Customs and Border Protection has said it shifted resources to handle large groups of migrants who overwhelm border officials to cross into the United States.

“CBP has taken significant steps to surge personnel and resources to impacted sectors and address the challenges we are experiencing across the southwest border,” a Department of Homeland Security official said in January.

Border officials also are trying to make sure fentanyl doesn’t enter the country.

Luken, of the Smart Border Coalition, said when officers take an extra three seconds to open and shut a car door, multiplied by the 150,000 to 160,000 people who cross daily, it’s easy to see how wait times are compounding.

Customs and Border Protection officials recently declined an interview with CalMatters, but Homeland Security officials have acknowledged that frustrated daily commuters and excessively long border lines highlight a need for funding to address what Washington has described as a border crisis.

“CBP will continue to evaluate the situation along the border and make operational changes as necessary,” Homeland Security said in a statement. “Stakeholders will be provided with operational updates as they become available.”

The Homeland Security statement also put some of the blame on people entering the United States irregularly and the people who smuggle them in.

“Encounter numbers continue to fluctuate as smugglers and bad actors continue to spread falsehoods and show complete disregard for the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable migrants,” the agency said. “The fact remains: the United States continues to enforce immigration law, and our borders are not open for those without a legal basis to enter the country.”



# Homelessness Spikes Again in San Diego County

The Regional Task Force on Homelessness reports a 3% year-over-year increase in homelessness that's less startling than last year's surge. **by Lisa Halverstadt | Voice of San Diego**

San Diego County's latest homeless census shows the crisis hit a new record this year.

This January's point-in-time count tallied 10,605 homeless residents sleeping in shelters or outdoors throughout the region, marking a 3 percent year-over-year spike that's less dramatic than the previous year's surge.

Nearly 58 percent of those residents — about 6,110 — slept outside, up 18 percent from a year ago.

The rise in unsheltered San Diegans is among the data points in this year's census that point to the region's continuing struggle to rapidly move people who become homeless into housing — and to catch those teetering on the edge.

The numbers also reflect reduced shelter options following the end of pandemic emergency funding and the region's move toward more homeless campgrounds and parking lots for people living in vehicles. People staying in these programs are considered unsheltered in the point-in-time count.

Regional Task Force on Homelessness CEO Tamera Kohler, whose organization oversees the annual census, emphasizes that the one-day January count should be considered a minimum tally of the region's homeless population.

The Task Force separately reports that 22, 299 distinct people accessed temporary housing such as shelters or interacted with outreach workers from October 2022 through September 2023 — more than double the number of people counted in January's one-day census.

What point-in-time data shows: The number of chronically homeless people living outdoors increased 19 percent and more unsheltered people reported grappling with serious mental illnesses and addiction, experiences that reflect how homeless residents become more vulnerable the longer they remain on the street.

"We are still seeing a system that is so overwhelmed that we're not able to address people's needs rapidly and (with) an urgent approach so they are experiencing homelessness for longer periods of time," Kohler said.

The federal government considers someone chronically homeless if they have a disability and have spent at least a year on the street.

While this year's increase in chronic homelessness was less than last year's, the latest spike speaks to a continuing systemic problem: The homeless service system isn't swiftly moving people off the street and that means unsheltered San Diegans can feel left behind — and end up more vulnerable. During this year's count, 31 percent of unsheltered people reported a serious mental illness while 23 percent



Caleb Ferguson, an outreach worker with PATH, speaks with Edwin Alexander Rosales, 39, during the annual Point in Time Count on Jan. 25, 2024. Rosales, of Honduras, said he has been homeless for five years. / Photo by Kristian Carreon

reported having a substance use disorder.

Rachel Hayes, who spent more than a decade on the street before moving into housing last summer, said she has watched friends and people she volunteers to assist struggle more as they spend more time on the street.

"The longer you leave 'em on the streets, the worse they get," Hayes said.

Other populations on the rise: The number of families counted sleeping outside countywide rose from 2023 to 2024, increasing from 24 to 43. And the number of unsheltered veterans also spiked for the second year in a row, increasing 15 percent despite bolstered efforts to aid that population.

The number of seniors sleeping outside also spiked 22 percent — and 43 percent of the more than 1,800 unsheltered seniors tallied during the census reported they were homeless for the first time.

A 44 percent year-over-year increase in people living in vehicles this year especially underscores an uptick in newly homeless San Diegans that the Task Force has tracked for more than two years. Cars and RVs are often an initial safe refuge for people who have lost their homes.

The rise in vehicle homelessness shows the service system is ill-equipped to aid all San Diegans in need before they end up homeless.

The bottom line: To significantly reduce homelessness, San Diego County's homeless response system needs to step up efforts to prevent homelessness — and more efficiently aid those who are already unhoused.

Tough budget times at the state and across the region threaten to

stymie those efforts.

Yet Kohler said she believes the latest point-in-time data showing a less significant surge than last year offers reason for hope. She sees opportunities to focus on senior and family homelessness, increase housing and prevention efforts for veterans and explore more ways to aid people living in vehicles.

“I think we’ve got some places to really make impact if we’re willing to look at the trends and put some of our time and resources there,” Kohler said.

What cities are seeing: North County cities saw especially large spikes in homelessness this year. Vista’s overall homeless population more than doubled, Carlsbad saw a nearly 84 percent spike and Encinitas’ population grew about two-thirds year over year.

Lemon Grove and Spring Valley, meanwhile, saw surges in unsheltered homelessness of more than 80 percent while Chula Vista saw a 58 percent year-over-year spike in street homelessness.

San Diego, which implemented a controversial homeless camping ban last summer, saw a 4 percent spike in overall homelessness and a 6 percent increase in unsheltered homelessness.

Kohler, whose organization opposed the ordinance, said the camping ban didn’t seem to have a significant impact on the city’s homelessness numbers or those in other cities.

“From where we saw the distribution, it just feels like in the (city of San Diego) there are people further out from city center, which also means they’re further from services,” Kohler said.



**Congratulations to Ulrick Matsunaga for his recognition as one of SD Metro's Top "40 Under 40!"**

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## Cox Business Survey shows AI support

Despite the headlines outing AI as human replacement most small business owners and employees surveyed by Cox Business the technology as a tool to strengthen and grow their teams. Cox Business surveyed small business owners and employees to better understand their usage of and sentiment on AI in the workplace. Fifty-two percent of small business owners said AI enables them to increase or retain employees, and 65 percent of small business employees said the same. Both small business owners and employees feel they have a good grasp on what AI is and feel comfortable using the tools within their organizations:

85 percent of owners are somewhat to veery comfortable using AI tools in their business.

75 percent of employees are somewhat to vey comfortable using AI tools in their business.

Fifty-three percent of small business owners report AI had a positive impact on customer experience in 2023, and plan to use AI to support the customer experience in several ways this year:

36% Online order/product/service recommendations.

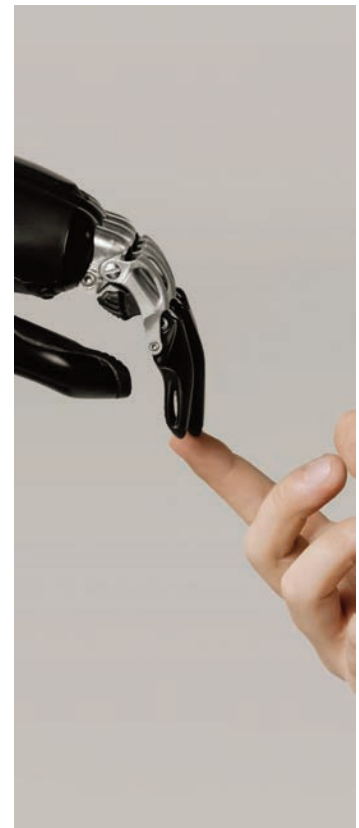
35% Online order placement

35% Website live chabot

33% Customer service calls

One third of small business owners invested in AI for their company last year and 53 percent plan to invest in AI even more in 2024.

“For small businesses with limited technology resources , building AI modelks specific to their business can be intimidating,” said Jeff Breaux, executive vice president of Cox Business.



# Tunnel Vision: When Stupid Drifts into Ludicrous



High Speed Rail train, artists rendering. (Photo: CHSRA.ca.gov)

**By Thomas Buckley | California Globe**

You have to hand it to the California High Speed Rail Authority – they just never stop, do they?

As noted in this California Globe piece Friday, the rail folks are trying to get the last little bit (don't hold your breath San Diego or Sacramento) of the colossally stupid LA to SF rail project through the environmental approval process next month.

This is the bit that will run from Palmdale to Burbank and faces a number of, um, challenges from the largely negative public reaction to the actual building of the tracks.

That's because it is quite possible that nearly the entire 28 mile stretch will be underground, you know, a tunnel or two or three through the mountains.

I'll let you have a giggle and a swig of whatever you happen to be drinking and then continue.

There.

People build tunnels all the time? So what's the problem?

First, the geography. The tunnel(s) will have to traverse faults lines under and in the San Gabriel Mountains through which it will pass. Faults and tunnels are not good friends because one little oopsyquake can shift the tracks out of alignment, crack the tunnel itself, or even just collapse the whole thing.

Second, there is the cost. The proposed tunnel(s) would be amongst the longest in the world – let's compare, shall we?

**Gottard Base Tunnel:** This runs under the Alps for about 35 miles connecting Switzerland and Italy. It cost, in today's dollars (as will all of the financials be) about \$18 billion dollars and took 20 years to build. Both of those figures are somewhere in the region of double initial estimates so California's high speed rail folks should feel right at home.

**Seikan Tunnel:** This is a 33 mile tunnel, with about 15 miles under the ocean, connecting Hokkaido Island with the rest of the Japan's high speed rail network. It cost about \$22 billion and took a very long time to build. The original surveying was done in 1946, construction began in 1971 and it was finished in 1998.

**Channel Tunnel:** Better known as the Chunnel, this 31 mile answer to a question that was first asked by Napoleon in 1802, also went way over time and way overbudget, costing, like the Seikan, about \$22 billion.

**Yulhyeon Tunnel:** Another high speed rail tunnel. The tunnel runs south from Seoul, Korea south for about 31 miles and cost about \$12 billion. However, since opening in 2016 the tunnel – which traverses one of the country's biggest and nastiest fault



lines – has been plagued by problems caused by poor surveying, slipshod construction, and crummy project oversight. Again, California’s high speed rail folks should feel right at home.

Depending on exactly how it will be measured, the PalmBank (BurDale?) tunnel could find itself at fifth on the list of world’s longest tunnels; at the very least it will be in the top ten.

In other words, this one little bit of the project will, by definition, be one of the biggest construction projects in the world.

We’re talking Hoover Dam, Pyramids type-stuff here and, considering the high speed rail authority’s track record (sorry, couldn’t resist,) they are guaranteed to utterly botch the whole thing.

“Yeah, Bill? A pyramid isn’t supposed to be round.”

“Oooohh...”

So comparing the per mile costs of between \$400 and \$650 million of the other tunnels – yes, they each have their own issues and features so this is not exact – you end up with about \$550 million per mile for PalmBank, or about \$16 billion – AT LEAST.

By the way, that’s \$8.700 per inch.

Think about those numbers. Remember when the entire 840 mile project was supposed to cost \$33 billion and connect LA and SF and SD and SacTown and points in between?

It turns out that just that 28 mile segment – about 3% of the entire promised distance – will be taking up HALF that amount.


Oh, by the way, the original backers knew exactly what the whole thing was really going to cost and how late it would be when they asked for your vote.

Factor in high speed rail incompetence and if...yeah, right...it gets built, the time delays and cost will be mind boggling. Speaking of time, the other tunnels took on average about 18 years to build, so the projected 2035 debut of a completed LA to SF track will be, um, delayed...again.


So, how many state officials does it take to build a train? Zero, because no one knows how to do it.

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Thomas Buckley is the former mayor of Lake Elsinore, CA, a Senior Fellow at the California Policy Center, and a former newspaper reporter. He is currently the operator of a small communications and planning consultancy and can be reached directly at planbuckley@gmail.com. You can read more of his work at his Substack page.



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