

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT



Rainwater that followed the path of a concrete walkway creates the image of a creek in the middle of the Village Green park in downtown Garden Grove. That's the First Baptist Church at the top. There's no rain forecast for our cities. At least not for a while (Tribune photo).

Kidnap-rape suspect facing life in prison without parole

The man accused of kidnapping a 13-year-old girl off the street in Westminster, raping her repeatedly and then fleeing to Guatemala has been returned to Orange County where – if convicted on all charges – he faces the possibility of life in prison without the possibility of parole. According to the Orange

County District Attorney, Brian Estuardo Verbenam-Martinez, 34, of Anaheim was located, arrested and extradited back to California through the combined efforts of local police agencies, the FBI, U.S. Department of Justice and Guatemalan officials.

On Dec. 5, 2025, he al-

legedly drove up next to the young girl walking in Westminster and coerced her into getting into his car.

He's accused of sexually assaulting her in multiple locations, including several parking lots and in his apartment before dropping her off at her friend's

Continued on page 2

Public hearing on Rodeo 39 loan

A public hearing to consider a report on an economic subsidy being paid to the operator of the Rodeo 39 Marketplace on Beach Boulevard is on the agenda for the Stanton City Council when it meets on Tuesday.

STANTON CITY COUNCIL

In 2019 the city entered into a "public benefit agreement" with Rodeo 39 Public Market and Shops LLC. That agreement called for a \$2.25 million

loan, which the developer would repay through a tax-sharing agreement from Oct. 1, 2022 through Oct. 1, 2030.

The developer would receive a credit equal to 50 percent of the tax revenue

Continued on page 2

Action on Ban on Kratom on The Agenda

Restrictions on 'nox' also considered

GARDEN GROVE CITY COUNCIL

rived from a tree native to Southeast Asia.

The second proposed ordinance would restrict – but not outlaw – the sale and distribution of nitrous oxide, known as "laughing gas" when used in dentistry, or "whippits" when consumed recreationally.

In the latter proposed ordinance, there is a prohibition on the sale and/or distribution of nitrous oxide with certain exceptions "such as when contained in a food product for use as a propellant or for use in medical or dental practices, or when otherwise permitted under applicable law," according to a staff report.

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By Jim Tortolano
Orange County Tribune

Should the sale of kratom or nitrous oxide be prohibited in Garden Grove?

Part Two of that issue will be considered by the city council when it meets on Tuesday. City leaders had originally considered them at the Feb. 10 meeting of the council, but the issue was tabled for two weeks.

This time the matter has been divided into two separate proposed ordinances, one of which prohibits the sale or distribution of kratom, a supplement de-

In The Tribune

Trout back in centerfield?



SEE SPORTS PAGE 6



'Good Luck, don't die' reviewed

ARTS & LIVING PAGE 5

Kratom, nitrous oxide on GG council agenda

Continued from page 1

Both substances, when abused, carry the risk of addiction and other serious health hazards.

Also on Tuesday night, the council will consider awarding a contract to SAVI Construction to install concrete pads along the

Medal of Honor Bike and Recreation Trail that runs diagonally through the city along the former Pacific Electric right-of-way from Nelson Street northwest to Brookhurst Street.

The installation of four pads will allow for the addition of new outdoor fitness equipment, "litter abatement signage," trail

furnishings, trash receptacles, bike racks and landscaping/mulch along the trail. The value of the contract is for \$89,375.

The council will meet at 6:30 p.m. in the Community Meeting Center, 11300 Stanford Ave.

Stanton council

Continued from page 1

generated by Rodeo 39 – a popular food hall – and two stand-alone eateries, Raising Cane's (a "hot chicken" fast food restaurant) and an In-N-Out hamburger restaurant.

The subsidy was in part assistance to the developer because of economic impact of the coronavirus epidemic.

Also on Tuesday, the council will hold a discussion to review the city's existing parking permit program and guidelines.

The council will meet in City Hall, 7800 Katella Ave., at 6:30 p.m.

Kidnap-rape

Continued from page 1

home in Garden Grove.

Verbena-Martinez has been charged with one felony count of kidnapping to commit a sex offense, one felony count of forcible rape, one felony count of sexual penetration of a child under 14 years of age by force, one felony count of forcible oral copulation with a minor under the age of 14 years old, and three felony counts of lewd acts upon a child under 14.

Westminster Police Chief Darin Lenyi said, "Our message is clear: If you commit a serious crime in our city, you will be pursued and held accountable. We will work hand in hand with our law enforcement partners to find you, no matter where you go, and bring you to justice."

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Jim Tortolano
Editor and Publisher
Marilyn Lewis Tortolano
General Manager

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E-mail : orangecountytribune@gmail.com
www.orangecountytribune.com
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News & Views

The continuing popularity of being doped-up

Nobody wants to be considered a “dope,” but there doesn’t seem to be any end to the number of folks who want to be doped-up, drunk, high, spit-faced, smashed, lit, etc.

Equally impressive – in a depressing sense – is the seemingly endless variety of ways that people can discover to shed their good judgment, increase your risk of losing your job, your car, your marriage and even your life.



Retorts
Jim Tortolano

Alcohol abuse is as old as the Old Testament. Smoking various kinds of herbs was popular among Native Americans long before there was any America, as least as far as the Europeans knew.

The big dope boom in the Sixties was significant because it moved from the poverty and isolation of the big cities into the suburbs. Thanks, John, Paul, George and Ringo! It might not be an exaggeration to suggest your popularization of narcotics might well have been as fatal as the Vietnam War.

As a kid, the sniffing of model airplane glue had its followers, as well as those who tried to smoke dried banana peels. Later trends embraced LSD, cocaine, “crack” cocaine, fentanyl, and on and on.

Efforts to combat this problem have resembled the old joke about the “War on Poverty,” in which poverty is said to have won.

Now we have ‘whippits’ and Kratom, which local cities are moving to ban, or at least wag a finger, at them.

There are, of course, many

Continued on page 8

HB police crack down on the illegal sale of nitrous oxide

Ban on ‘whippits’ OK’d on Dec.5 by city council

Enforcement of a ban on the sale and distribution of nitrous oxide in Huntington Beach is now in effect.

According to the HBPD, the ordinance curbing traffic of what’s variously known as “laughing gas,” “NOX,” “galaxy gas” or “whippits” – with some exceptions including use in dentistry and medicine – creates a misdemeanor offense punishable by a fine of up to \$1,000, up to six months in county jail, or both.

Each day a violation continues constitutes a separate offense, and businesses violating the ordinance – which went into effect on Dec. 4, 2025 could suffer the loss of a business license.

A combined effort of city code enforcement staff and the HB-

Continued on page 8



AN EXAMPLE of the flavored “whippits” (HBPD).

Sponsorships available for grad reception

Sponsorship opportunities are now available for local businesses and organizations to support the Garden Grove College Graduates’ Reception in Summer 2026. Sponsors have a unique opportunity to gain valuable exposure to local and regional au-

diences while supporting higher education and a professional workforce in Garden Grove. Sponsorships begin at \$300.

Last summer, with the support of generous sponsors, the City of Garden Grove recognized nearly 50 residents at the recep-

tion. Graduates received local, state, and federal certificates of recognition, along with more than \$10,000 in opportunity cash awards, gift cards, and services.

Sponsorship benefits include an invitation to attend the 2026 Gar-

Continued on page 8

GGUSD honored by the Carnegie Institute

The Garden Grove Unified School District has been honored with so many awards and accolades in recent years, it may become necessary to build a new trophy case.

Mostly recently, the GGUSD has been named a recipient of the first Carnegie Award for Impact, a national honor recognizing

“significant and sustained improvement in high school student success.”

A highlight of these efforts is the Freshman on Track initiative, which supports students during the pivotal ninth-grade



year. “This national recognition reflects the extraordinary work happening in our schools every day,” said Board of Education President Bob

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NewsUpdate

Supreme Court Strikes Down Tariffs

But president says he's got another way

President Donald Trump's imposition of tariffs without the approval of Congress was rebuked by the U.S. Supreme Court on Friday.

The high court voted 6-3 to declare Trump's actions "unconstitutional." But Trump did not yield, calling the court majority "lapdogs" and "disloyal to our Constitution," reported the Associated Press.

His response included a new global 10 percent tariff under a law that's never been used for tariffs and is limited to 150 days.

Chief Justice John Roberts wrote the majority opinion, stating "The Framers [of the



U.S. SUPREME COURT BUILDING (Shutterstock).

Constitution] did not vest any part of the taxing power in the Executive Branch."

Unresolved was whether those affected by the tariffs would be refunded. "It's likely to be

a mess," wrote Justice Brett Kavanaugh, who sided with Trump.

Epstein estate will pay out up to \$35 million to claimants

While admitting to no wrongdoing, the executors of Jeffrey Epstein's estate on Friday agreed to pay survivors of his sexual abuse a sum of up to \$35 million.

United Press International reports that Epstein's personal lawyer and personal accountant were sued for "facilitation, participation and concealment of

Epstein's illegal conduct" for financial gain."

The settlement will come from what's left of Epstein's estate and not from his former lawyer and accountant.

The estate will pay \$25 million if the number of eligible claimants is less than 40. If more, it will pay out \$35 million.

Weather: Warmer days ahead

Now that the rainy stretch is over, we in the West Orange County cities can look forward to some higher temperatures. The forecast for Saturday is for a daytime high of 70 with an overnight low of 47 with mostly sunny skies. Sunday will be warmer, reaching 76 during the day and 50 overnight with mostly sunny skies. Monday is even warmer to 78 (53) and partly cloudy skies. Tuesday will cool to 75 (54) with partly cloudy skies.

USA and Canada will meet for Olympic gold medal

As was widely anticipated, the gold medal match for ice hockey in the 2026 Milan Winter Olympics will come down to a clash between the United States and Canada.

The New York Times reported that the American team defeated Slovakia 6-2 on Friday, setting up the championship meeting on Sunday. It will be the third time the two national teams meet for the gold, with Canada winning

5-2 and 3-2.

Canada advanced to meet the US team with a 3-2 win over Finland, rallying from a 2-0 deficit.

In the most recent meeting between the two North American teams, Canada won 3-2 in overtime in February 2024.

Although the games have usually been closely fought, Canada has a 15-4 record in Olympic hockey versus the United States team.

Great Thoughts

"When one with honeyed words but evil mind Persuades the mob, great woes befall the state" – Euripides

"No one is an unjust villain in his own mind." – Jim Butcher

"A nationalist encourages us to do our worst, and then tells us that we are the best. A patriot, by contrast, wants the nation to live up to its ideals, which means asking us to be our best selves." – Timothy Snyder

Arts & Living

It's An AI Apocalypse in 'Good Luck'

Sam Rockwell says he's from our future

By Jake Coyle
AP Film Writer

In Gore Verbinski's absurdist AI sci-fi satire "Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die," a strange unnamed man (Sam Rockwell) steps into a Los Angeles diner and declares that he's from the future. "All of this is going to go horribly wrong," he says.

Norm's diner on La Cienega might not seem like the most likely battleground to decide the fate of the world, but that's exactly what this fellow — bearded, with a wreath of wires around his head and a bomb strapped under a translucent rain coat — contends.

He is there, while customers sip coffee and bite into an omelet, to enlist recruits for the resistance. In the future, he says, people have entirely stopped participating in life.

"It all started with morning phone time," he says. In the enjoyably oddball, forebodingly bleak and ridiculously plausible "Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die," a ragtag group fights a coming AI apocalypse across a handful of nondescript West Hollywood blocks.

It's been argued that with the onset of AI, storytellers need to get weirder, more imaginative, more human. The Daniels' "Everything Everywhere All at Once," which likewise married cosmic and mundane, was animated partly in this spirit. "Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die," scripted by Matthew Robinson, isn't that creative, and it grows more wayward the deeper it goes into its too-lengthy runtime. But there's a bonkers charm to how Verbinski tackles contemporary anxieties head on.

This is the first film in a decade from Verbinski, the director



SAM ROCKWELL stars in "Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die" (Briarcliff Entertainment).

Movie Review

of "Pirates of the Caribbean," "Mouse Hunt" and one of the better animated features of the century, "Rango." But after a few flops ("The Lone Ranger," "A Cure for Wellness"), Verbinski cobbled together a more modest budget for this independent production.

The lack of scale is noticeable in the climatic moments of "Good Luck," but Verbinski's penchant for lush detail and movie-reference onslaught remains. Our central figure is a hobo prophet who looks straight out of Terry Gilliam's "The Fisher King," only more tech-enabled.

He has a countdown on his watch, and the imminent attack on the diner means time is extremely short.

He's done this before, he says, 117 times, to be precise. His speech is well-rehearsed, but Rockwell's future man more resembles an actor who's been doing the same play for too long. His "Groundhog Day"-like time loop has drained him of optimism. He's left to desperately and cavalierly keep trying various combinations of recruits in

the hope they survive, escape and do something that will prevent the AI apocalypse. It's a remarkably well-suited role for Rockwell, whose stumbling charm lifts "Good Luck" nearly as much as Johnny Depp did in "Pirates of the Caribbean."

"Good Luck" never quite matches the electricity of its diner-scene opening, but as a group forms, the movie ropes in other characters whose backstories make for fablelike flashbacks. They play like mini "Black Mirror" episodes.

One volunteer, a single mom named Susan (Juno Temple), is still mourning the death of

Good ★ ★ ★

her son from a school shooting, which in this reality has grown into such a common occurrence that scientists have developed clones to replace deceased children. The clones aren't quite right, though. They all say "Thank you for your service" and the cheaper ones come with ads. (This is the movie's darkest and best joke.)

Ingrid (Haley Lu Richardson) is allergic to phones and Wi-Fi. Her story includes a boyfriend who matches her in a technology-free

Continued on page 8

Deal yourself in to help LE

The 4th annual Nick Vella Memorial Poker Tournament and Fundraiser is today (Feb. 21) at 18311 Gothard St., Huntington Beach. Buy-in is \$55. It's to raise money to provide financial help to members of the law enforcement community. Vella was killed in a HBPD helicopter crash in 2022.



TheSportsPages

Being the center of attention has its rewards

As you may have read – perhaps on this very page, today – Mike Trout wants to get back his former post as centerfielder for the Los Angeles Angels.

He is clearly in the twilight of his amazing career, having been the American League MVP for three seasons and established himself as “The Face of Baseball.”

Now that title belongs to Shohei Ohtani, but Mr. Trout wants – at least – to get his favorite place in the lineup restored to him.

I don’t question that. To anyone who’s played any variation of the sport being in the center of that vast expanse of green out there is the throne of the game.

Pitchers might get more attention; the catcher is the quarterback of the defense, and short-stop looks like the most fun. But centerfield, oh boy. That’s the dream position. You defend the deepest part of the field.

You’re the guy who leaps at the wall and robs the Other Guy of a homer. Or you making a diving catch, sprinting in with the jets flaming to make a “shoe-string catch,” then rolling to your feet to make the throw that makes a too-eager baserunner into the goat of a double play.

Playing center field means you have two outfield buds to chat with during the down times.

It means you’re not chasing a wind-blown pop fly into foul territory and – sometimes – plunging into the laps of several fans in the front rows.

In general it means less running, and more glory. Old-tim-



Sports Retorts

Jim Tortolano

Trout Wants Center Field

He’s willing to try other positions for Angels, too

TEMPE, Ariz. (AP)— Mike Trout says he would prefer to return to center field for the Los Angeles Angels, and the star slugger says he will skip the World Baseball Classic because of insurance issues.

The 11-time All-Star who been plagued by injuries since 2021 says his familiar position isn’t as physically demanding as the corner outfield spots, contrary to traditional thinking.

Trout played his most games since 2019 last season, finishing at 130. The three-time American League MVP started 22 of his first 29 games in right field before a knee injury sidelined him for a month. The 34-year-old was exclusively a designated hitter when he returned in late May.

Trout had 26 home runs but hit just .232, by far the worst average of his career when he had at least 400 at-bats.

He spent time in left field early in his career but was a center fielder for 11 consecutive seasons before the switch to right. Injuries limited Trout to 111 games the previous two years.

Trout said conversations with first-year manager Kurt Suzuki have included the idea of a return to center. “I feel like I’m at my best when I’m in center,” Trout told reporters



MIKE TROUT wants to be back in his familiar spot in center field this year (AP photo)

at the club’s spring training facility Monday. “If I have to go to the corner, I’ll go to the corner.”

Trout believes a return to center will be good for his health.

“When I was in center, it was less on my body than the corners,” Trout said. “To be honest, in right field I felt I was running a lot.

“Talking to some other outfielders and they’re saying that they feel

the same way sometimes, center is less on your legs. I just feel ... confident in center.”

Trout, who played in his only WBC three years ago, had said he was interested in playing again before insurance issues arose.

“It’s disappointing,” Trout said. “I wanted to run it back with all the guys.”

The Lakers won this ‘Battle of LA’

By Hugo Baker
Orange County Tribune

NHL and NBA

When cross-town rivals meet, that often turns up the temperature of the play and closeness of the outcome.

As the Los Angeles Lakers and Los Angeles Clippers returned from the All-Star break on Friday night, they returned to that mood as the Lake Show slipped by the Clips 125-122.

Luka Doncic scored 38 points and had 11 assists for the winners. Austin Reaves chipped in 29 more points and LeBron James contributed 11 assists and 13 points as the Lakers improved their record to 34-21 (first in the NBA Pacific Division).

The loss kept the Clippers (27-29) from clawing their way back to .500. Kawhi Leonard scored

31 points before hobbling out with an ankle injury with five minutes to play.

Bennedict Mathurin scored 26 points and had seen rebounds.

The Lakers jumped out to an 11-point lead early, but the Clippers outscored them in each quarter thereafter, falling short of overtaking them.

On Sunday the Lakers will host the Boston Celtics (36-19) while the Clippers will host the Orlando Magic (29-15).

Former Dodger now playing for Padres

PEORIA, Ariz. (AP) — Walker Buehler has signed with the San Diego Padres after the right-hander spent the first eight seasons of his major league career with their archrivals, the Los Angeles Dodgers.

Buehler was in the Padres' clubhouse Tuesday morning after agreeing to a minor league deal with an invitation to big league camp.

"Yeah, it feels a little weird," Buehler told reporters in Arizona after pulling on a brown and gold uniform. "I imagine five years ago it would have felt a lot more weird, but this is a crazy game and this is a great opportunity for me."

The 31-year-old Buehler said he will "come in and try and make the team and contribute in any way I can. I'm a starter, and I want to start, so I'm here to try and make the rotation."

Buehler spent last season with Boston and Philadelphia, which signed him in late August after the Red Sox released him. Buehler struggled in Boston, but looked good enough during his brief time with the Phillies to generate interest from the Padres and other teams.

"I threw the ball well over there, and getting the velocity back as well as the delivery has kind of been the big thing," Buehler said. "The second half of last year was relatively successful compared to the first half, and there's stuff we want to continue to build on there."

Buehler earned two All-Star selections and two World Series rings during his 10 years in the Dodgers organization, serving as a mainstay in their rotation whenever healthy and often looking like one of the majors' top starters.

A TITLE IN VIEW



The Ocean View Seahawks' girls' soccer team is one win away from playing for a CIF-SS championship. After a 4-2 win over Adelanto on Wednesday in a Division 6 quarterfinal contest, the team will meet Palmdale Aerospace Academy at 3 p.m. on Saturday in semifinal play. OVHS is 12-6-3 overall and the Griffins are 11-1. The winner of that game will play for the title on Feb. 27 against the winner of the other semifinal, pitting Segerstrom of Santa Ana (13-2-6) against Grace of Simi Valley (14-4-2). In above photo, Ocean View (in maroon) played Westminster earlier and won 2-0 (HBUHSD photo).



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'Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die' film review

Continued from page 5

life until a virtual reality headset leads him to drop out of real life, entirely. Also in the mix are a pair of high school teachers (Michael Peña) and Janet (Zazie Beetz) whose students never

look up from their phones. As in most sci-fi movies, the set up of "Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die" is better than its follow through. But the movie has a kinetic kick, and you could argue that it's obsessed with the

right things. We could use more movies similarly engaged. Even if not every part of this particular mission is a success, like the numbers game of Rockwell's protagonist, eventually one will get through.

"Good Luck Have Fun Don't Die," a Briarcliff Entertainment release, is in theaters. It's rated R by the Motion Picture Association for pervasive language, violence, some grisly images and brief sexual content. Running time: 134 minutes.



Who helped eradicate the plague of polio?
Garden Grove Rotary

Who sponsors a defibrillator program to save lives when heart attacks strike?
Garden Grove Rotary

Who recognizes 6th grade students for achievement in academics and scholarship?
Garden Grove Rotary

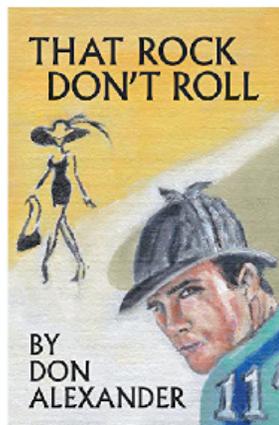
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- The Orange County Tribune

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Don Alexander has been a sports columnist, a sports broadcaster, talk show host and a college instructor. This is his first novel.

Never too late for a Valentine

Retorts: Why all the dope?

Continued from page 3

causes for these bad choices. But one of them, experts say, is simply loneliness. Today's tech-oriented world has atomized us. Many of our "friends" reside at the far end of the world-wide-web. There's a good chance you don't know much about your neighbors and belong to no local club, softball team, service group, etc. Local newspapers (and local news coverage) are becoming a thing of the past, so we know less and less about what's going on with the people who may live just a few blocks away. Good friends, a loving family, a strong faith or belief system seem to be what's missing for too many people. And that's something that no ordinance, crackdown or even jail seems to have much luck filling in that fatal gap.

Sports Retorts: 'Centerfield'

Continued from page 6

ers still refer to "The Wertz Catch" as the greatest play in baseball history. In the 1954 World Series, Willie Mays was the New York Giants centerfielder. In the eighth inning with the score tied 2-2 and two runners on base. Cleveland Indians' slugger Vic Wertz smashed a fly ball to deep, deep center – the distance marker was for 483 feet. Mays turned his back to the diamond, stretched out his arms and made a stunning over-the-shoulder catch, spun and delivered a powerful throw to the infield which kept the runners from scoring. The Giants went on to win the game and the Series. That's what centerfielders dream of.

Sponsorships for graduates

Continued from page 3

den Grove College Graduates' Reception and recognition through a variety of media and marketing channels, including City publications, social media, and the City website. For sponsorship levels and to complete a sponsorship form, visit www.ggcity.org/grads. For more information, contact the Office of Community Relations at communityrelations@ggcity.org (714) 741-5280.

GGUSD honored by Carnegie

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Harden. "Our educators and staff continue to strengthen systems, collaborate across campuses, and provide targeted support to students during one of the most critical years of their academic journey. We are proud of the impact this work is having on student success." The GGUSD serves most of Garden Grove, as well as parts of Anaheim, Cypress, Fountain Valley, Santa Ana, Stanton and Westminster.