



The San Diego Convention Center, which faces \$200 million in repair work in the next five years, is experiencing an increasing number of infrastructure failings, some of which are happening at big conventions that help fuel the local economy. **ALEJANDRO TAMAYO / U-T**

The S.D. convention center is in disrepair. Can it be fixed?

Building failures jeopardize bookings, but an estimated \$400M in work is needed

By **Lori Weisberg**
UNION-TRIBUNE

Just weeks before the start of Comic-Con's annual gathering, where more than 135,000 people would soon be filling the city's convention center, the unthinkable happened. A key chiller needed to cool the building in the peak of summer had failed, setting off a frantic, nationwide search for a replacement.

Five days and more than \$200,000 later, a chiller the size of an RV was located, and Comic-Con 2023 was saved.

If only that were an isolated

incident, say those who run the waterfront facility. Building failures, from malfunctioning boilers and coolers to plumbing and roof leaks, are increasingly occurring, some of them during high-profile medical and tech conventions, the most recent just a couple of months ago.

A plumbing leak triggered by a rainstorm led to water flowing onto the center's crowded exhibit floor where thousands were attending a meeting of orthopedic surgeons from around the world.

San Diego's aging bayfront center, a portion of which dates to the late 1980s, is approaching

the point of no return. While long regarded as one of the top venues in the country for major conventions, that stellar reputation is now at risk, the center's operator warned elected leaders at a recent budget hearing.

Over the next five years, the San Diego center is facing a stunning \$200 million in deferred repair work, plus \$200 million more over the next 20 years.

Without clear consensus yet on a funding source, the facility's future remains in limbo, and hundreds of millions of dollars that flow into the regional economy from citywide conventions are in

jeopardy, fear convention officials.

"We continue to experience service disruptions, safety hazards and escalating repair costs," Convention Center Corp. Chief Operating Officer Corey Albright told City Council members. "These failures required immediate emergency intervention, and we're fortunate that they could be managed, but there are certainly scenarios where they wouldn't be able to be managed, where these failures would cost us and the city millions of dollars in tax revenue and economic impact."

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Crash revives airport safety concerns

Montgomery-Gibbs' setting amid homes, businesses at issue

By **Lucas Robinson**
& **Jeff McDonald**
UNION-TRIBUNE

It's 540 acres of runways and hangars and flying schools surrounded on all sides by sprawling San Diego neighborhoods that attract thousands of pilots every year.

And now, after six people were killed and more than a dozen homes were heavily damaged in the fiery crash of a private jet on its approach to Montgomery-Gibbs Executive Airport early Thursday, the city-owned landing field is under scrutiny yet again.

Investigators are still working to figure out what caused the Cessna 550 Citation II to plunge into a cluster of military family homes in the Murphy Canyon area of Tierrasanta, east of the general aviation airport.

But the fatal accident has reignited safety concerns about Montgomery-Gibbs, where so many homes and businesses sit beneath its popular flight paths.

"It is crazy to have a private airport with rookie pilots flying around, training pilots in a heavily urbanized area," said Jack

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VICTIMS MOURNED

Music industry figures, martial artist and photographer among those killed in plane crash. **A7**

Report: Jails fail to track mistakes, successes

Grand jurors say data is needed to enact health care reforms

By **Kelly Davis**
& **Jeff McDonald**
UNION-TRIBUNE

The operations manual for the San Diego Sheriff's Medical Services Division includes a section outlining the agency's commitment to continuous quality improvement, or CQI — the old maxim in health care that calls for constantly doing better to progressively boost outcomes.

The policy update from 2022 noted this objective: "To continuously monitor and improve upon the quality of health care delivered in all detention facilities."

But according to a new report from the San Diego County grand jury, the Sheriff's Office does not track critical performance indicators and therefore is unable to enact data-driven reforms to better address the medical and mental health needs of people in jail.

The failure is especially important, grand jurors said, because San Diego County jails have for years reported significant numbers of people dying in their custody.

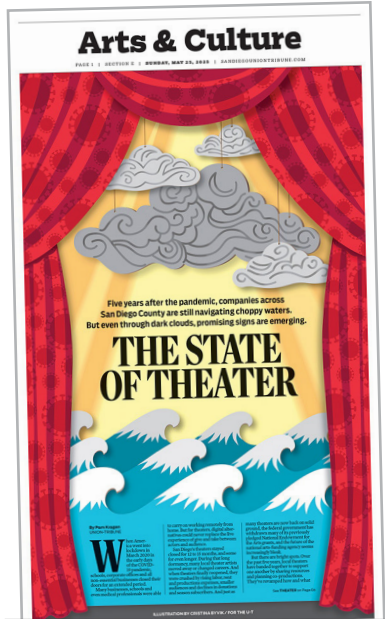
Jurors commended the Sheriff's Office for "significant improvement in suicide prevention efforts and providing increased mental health treatment" after a 2018 investigation

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ARTS & CULTURE

The current state of local theater

Five years after the pandemic, theater companies across San Diego County are still navigating choppy waters. And now, the future of national arts funding seems bleak. But even through dark clouds, promising signs are emerging. **E1**



BUSINESS

Breweries secure new homes in S.D.

Recently, a number of new, out-of-town brewing companies have entered the San Diego market through the acquisition of former breweries. Since 2023, there have been eight instances of this, with six of those newcomers hailing from Orange County. **C1**

Charter network's spending of taxpayer cash scrutinized

Critics target Elite Academic Academy ties to third party

By **Kristen Taketa**
UNION-TRIBUNE

For five years, Eric Shirley taught homeschool students for a small California charter school network called Elite Academic Academy. He left in 2023, he said, because of several things he found fishy about Elite's administration.

Among them: Elite's CEO Meghan Freeman lives in a mountain resort town in Montana and gets paid more than \$380,000 in salary and benefits each year to serve 1,800 students. And when Elite first started in 2018 and served a few hundred students, its founder and then-CEO Brent Woodard made more than \$400,000. But Shirley's biggest concern was that Elite was paying millions of dollars a year to an obscure third-party corporation — one created by Woodard.

This corporation not only employs family members of Elite administrators in high-level jobs but also has paid Woodard six-figure sums each year as a consultant.



Inspire, with a site in Poway, above, is among the charter networks that have faced scrutiny in recent years. **U-T FILE**

"The intent of some of these programs is not to provide a better education," Shirley said. "It's to put money in the pockets of administrators."

Elite pulled in \$31.7 million in public school funding last school year, according to audit reports for the network's two schools.

Shirley is one of three former Elite teachers who told The San Diego Union-Tribune they worry the charter network — which includes a school authorized out of San Diego County — is the latest in a string of examples of how operators of charter schools, which are independently run public

schools, can exploit lax charter laws and oversight requirements to use taxpayer funds in questionable ways.

Other examples include the now-defunct A3 charter network, whose leaders pleaded guilty to conspiracy for manipulating student enrollment to profit off of public school funding, and the Inspire charter network, which state auditors found was collecting millions in public school dollars without records to justify the collections.

Elite is one of many California charter school networks

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"The intent of some of these programs is not to provide a better education. It's to put money in the pockets of administrators."

— **ERIC SHIRLEY**, former Elite Academic Academy teacher

DIGITAL ACTIVATION

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STEVEN P. DINKIN A PATH FORWARD

As school year ends, feelings of despair and hope

This weekend marks the symbolic end of the school year and the start of a phenomenon known as “summer slide.” For many young learners, the loss of access to educational resources in summertime can erode academic gains, especially in reading and math.

Summer slide creates a cycle of continuous catch-up that can hurt educational outcomes. By the time they reach fifth grade, students affected by summer learning loss can lag their peers by 2.5 to 3 years, according to Learner, a student learning platform.

For one little girl, the end of the school year can’t happen soon enough.

The fourth grader, age 10, had stopped on the playground to remove a stone from her shoe. A boy in her class picked up the shoe and threw it, calling her the N-word. Two classmates intervened and asked the boy what he was doing. He called them the N-word, too.

I heard this story from the little girl’s grandmother, who happens to be a trainer at the National

Conflict Resolution Center. The incident, she said, made her feel sad, angry, disappointed and helpless. She is in her 50s and has never been slurred this way — nor have her two children, ages 20 and 30.

Ironically, this trainer had just co-led a session for parents of elementary school-aged children on how (and how much) to engage in challenging conversations with them about race and other social identities.

It’s the kind of work NCRC has been doing for years in school districts across San Diego County. Following the COVID-19 pandemic it became urgent, as students were scarred in ways that made classroom teaching (and learning) nearly impossible. We were hired to rebuild belonging and a sense of community in schools, engaging with students, faculty, administrators and parents.

And we made strides. A research report published last year by RAND Corporation commended NCRC’s efforts to improve school climate, noting

that teachers, staff, and students had positive perceptions of our work. RAND also praised the strong relationships that were established with leaders and educators, as we embedded ourselves in the schools. School board members became vocal proponents of our programs.

COVID funds — which had to be used by fall 2024 — paid for some of the work in schools. The loss of those funds has increased fiscal caution, along with factors like declining student enrollment and state budget uncertainties. As a result, many of our school-based initiatives are coming to an end.

But our partnership with the San Dieguito Union High School District continues and thrives. In 2024, the district launched its One San Dieguito initiative to build inclusion and belonging among students and across the district. The program aims to make every voice heard and every student feel validated and valued.

Over two years, district administration, faculty, staff and student ambassadors will participate in NCRC’s Culture, Communica-

tion and Conflict training. We developed the curriculum to give leaders in all sectors the tools and skills to navigate in a divided America.

Anwar Shareef is the director of the One San Dieguito initiative. Recently, I had an opportunity to participate with Anwar in a student-led forum at the district office. Thirty students attended, representing all SDUHSD campuses.

The district wanted to hear their voices: What is the district doing well to create a greater sense of belonging, and what improvements are needed? While administrators and faculty were in attendance, too, their role was to listen.

Students expressed enthusiasm for the breadth of opportunities available to them, with numerous clubs, organizations, extracurricular activities and electives offered. Beyond participation, students feel encouraged to take on leadership roles. The presence of trusted adults on campus — who they can approach with a personal issue — also matters.

Perhaps more illuminating was the discussion about ways the district could increase belonging. Participants said they would like to see more cultural representation and programming on campus, open to all students — not just those who identify with that culture. They are past othering and think identity issues like race and class are worn out (or as one student said, “so’80s”). While our differences are to be celebrated, humans are humans.

The discussion made me hopeful that the funding pendulum will swing back, so school districts once again invest in initiatives like One San Dieguito. When it comes to student belonging and community building, society can ill-afford a summer slide. And for one little girl, any wait is too long.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCRC’s programming, visit [nrcrconline.com](#)

SCENE

Heart and Soul Gala



From left, JFS CEO Michael Hopkins; gala chair Dr. Robert Rubenstein; JFS board chair Deborah Bucksbaum Maio; gala chair Marie Raftery; honoree Karen Silberman; incoming CEO Dana Toppel; honorees Susanna Flaster, Michael Flaster, and Jeff Silberman. **JEWISH FAMILY SERVICE OF SAN DIEGO**

By U-T staff

Jewish Family Service of San Diego hosted its 2025 Heart and Soul Gala at the Rady Shell at Jacobs Park last month. Funds raised at this year’s event, titled “Together for Tomorrow,” benefit the nonprofit’s programs and services to help people of all faiths, backgrounds and ages move forward in their lives.

The event also celebrated the contributions of the 2025 honorees Karen and Jeff Silberman and Susanna and Michael Flaster and commemorated JFS CEO

Michael Hopkins’ 13 years of leadership, ahead of his retirement this summer.

If your organization has held an event, you’re welcome to email a high-resolution photo along with information on the event to society@sduniontribune.com. Please clearly identify those in the photo, make them aware their image might appear in print and online, include the photographer’s name for credit and be sure to include the who, what, where, when and why information on the event.

Today in history

SUNDAY, MAY 25

TODAY’S HIGHLIGHT

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was killed when a Minneapolis police officer pressed his knee on Floyd’s neck for 9 ½ minutes while Floyd was handcuffed and pleading that he couldn’t breathe; Floyd’s death, captured on video by a bystander, would lead to worldwide protests, some of which turned violent, and a reexamination of racism and policing in the U.S.

ON THIS DATE

1787: The Constitutional Convention began at the Pennsylvania State House in Philadelphia after enough delegates had shown up for a quorum.
1946: Transjordan became a kingdom as it proclaimed its new monarch, Abdullah I.
1961: President John F. Kennedy told Congress: “I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the Earth.”

1964: The U.S. Supreme Court, in *Griffin v. County School Board of Prince Edward County*, ordered the Virginia county to reopen its public schools, which officials had closed in an attempt to circumvent the Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* desegregation ruling.
In 1977, “Star Wars” was released by 20th Century Fox; it would become the highest-grossing film in history at the time.
1979: 273 people died when an American Airlines DC-10 crashed just after takeoff from Chicago’s O’Hare Airport.
2008: NASA’s Phoenix Mars Lander arrived on the Red Planet to begin searching for evidence of water; the spacecraft confirmed the presence of water ice at its landing site.
2012: The private company SpaceX made history as its Dragon capsule became the first commercial spacecraft to dock with the International Space Station.
2018: Harvey Weinstein was arrested and charged in New

York with rape and another sex felony in the first prosecution to result from the wave of allegations against him. (Weinstein would be convicted of two felony counts in 2020, but an appeals court would overturn the conviction in 2024. A retrial on the charges began in April 2025.)

TODAY’S BIRTHDAYS

Actor Ian McKellen is 86. Country singer Jessi Colter is 82. Actor-singer Leslie Uggams is 82. Filmmaker and puppeteer Frank Oz is 81. Actor Karen Valentine is 78. Actor Jacki Weaver is 78. Rock singer Klaus Meine is 77. Actor Patti D’Arbanville is 74. Playwright Eve Ensler is 72. Actor Connie Sellecca is 70. Musician Paul Weller is 67. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., is 65. Actor Mike Myers is 62. Actor Octavia Spencer is 55. Actor Cillian Murphy is 49. Football Hall of Famer Brian Urlacher is 47. Olympic gymnastics gold medalist Aly Raisman is 31.

The Associated Press

DRONE

From Page 1

records and other rules, said the case should never have taken this much time and money.

“The ruling confirms what everyone except Chula Vista’s politicians, police chief and lawyers knew before the lawsuit was filed: Videos taken by police are subject to public review when not part of a bona fide investigation,” he said.

A spokesperson declined to discuss the decision or explain why Chula Vista has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to keep the videos from public view.

“The city is evaluating the recent ruling, as well as its options, and will refrain from further comment at this time,” Adrianna Relph, a special projects and legislative manager in the City Manager’s Office, said in an email.

Chula Vista has a history of withholding public records or failing to post public documents on the city website.

The decision from Taylor came a month after he issued a tentative ruling that was largely similar to his final order. It recounts his view of dozens of videos and provides the first public account or description of the withheld images.

Taylor divided the videos into separate categories, finding that many were not investigatory in nature at all



Chula Vista police Officer Christopher Bearss pilots a drone. **COURTESY OF CHULA VISTA POLICE**

and that others did not invade the privacy of people photographed by the overhead cameras.

On March 27, 2021, for example, a Chula Vista Police Department drone was dispatched to a call where an elderly man had fallen.

The city argued that releasing the tape would violate the man’s privacy, but the judge disagreed. He described the view from above the scene, an overflight of the San Diego Coun-

try Club and other landmarks on the way to the emergency scene.

“The fall evidently occurred quite close to the entrance to the store, as the subject is under an awning or overhang and only his legs are visible (clad in light trousers),” the judge wrote. “At 14:35, the ambulance arrives and the drone returns to base.

“There is no possible privacy violation implicated, as only the subject’s legs can be visualized,” he added.

“The city must turn over this video.”

In other videos, the judge determined that the material could be properly withheld.

Responding to a check requested earlier in March 2021 of a person not wearing COVID-19 protective gear, a drone passes above shopping malls, a school and apartments as the operator zooms in with the camera to get close-up images.

“Because of the evidence of specifically targeted

search for the person habitually refusing to wear mask at bus stops and thereby creating disturbance, the court concludes this deployment was investigatory in nature and not bulk data collection. Petitioner is entitled to no relief as to this video,” Taylor wrote.

David Loy of the First Amendment Coalition has been following the Chula Vista police drone case for years. He said the judge appears to have done a dili-

gent analysis of what videos may be withheld from public inspection and which must be released.

“You cannot just categorically deny disclosure,” he said. “Not every drone video is made for the purpose of investigating crime.”

The First Amendment Coalition legal director said he was not sold on the idea that the city should protect the identity of people in public captured on the drone footage by blurring their faces.

“I’m not 100% sure that there is always an expectation of privacy just because someone’s face is in a video,” Loy said.

For his part, Castañares said he was grateful that his four-year legal quest is ending.

“This case is a big step toward more access to public records, which have been hidden by police agencies for many years,” he said. “Police have used a broad investigative records exemption to improperly shield records which are not connected to investigations.”

It’s not clear how much Chula Vista invested in its defense of withholding the drone footage. City officials would not say.

Chula Vista taxpayers also are liable for the legal fees incurred by Briggs over four years of litigation. He said the amount of his fees and expenses have not yet been tabulated, but he expects they will exceed \$500,000.

EXAMINER

From Page 1

autopsy reports.

But that backlog is now cleared, Lucas said this week. “We’ve really made just gobs of progress, and are really more or less in a stable position now,” he said.

Lucas said much of the backlog was in toxicology testing, but positions were added, and now staffing levels are 30% higher than in 2022. The department also contracted an outside company to get caught up, and that work is complete.

The average turnaround time for toxicology results is now two to four months.

And the department is expecting to upgrade its toxicology testing equipment. A state grant and county funding will help buy new equipment for the toxicology laboratory that a county spokesman said will help it detect a wider range of drugs in smaller sample sizes and increase testing sensitivity. The expectation is more accurate results and an even faster turnaround time.

Drug deaths overall are down in the county, as well, decreasing 20% from 2023 to

2024. Fentanyl deaths specifically declined by 30%, according to an office spokesperson.

Lucas began working for San Diego County in 2001, holding jobs as deputy and chief deputy medical examiner, the second-in-command. Perhaps the most high-profile autopsies that Lucas is known for conducting were those of 6-year-old Max Shacknai and 32-year-old Rebecca Zahau in the mysterious Coronado Spreckels mansion case of 2011.

Max fell from the second floor of the mansion and died five days later from his injuries; Zahau, the girlfriend of

Max’s father, pharmaceutical mogul Jonah Shacknai, was found hanging, bound and gagged at the mansion two days after Max’s fall.

Lucas’ autopsies concluded that Max’s death was an accident and Zahau’s death was suicide. Those conclusions were heavily disputed by others, including Zahau’s family, but Lucas and other county officials stood by the autopsies’ findings. Lucas recalled later in an interview that he initially thought the case was a homicide, but the investigation took him to a different conclusion.

In 2017, Lucas was hired

to be the medical examiner-coroner in Los Angeles County, where he oversaw a staff of 250 people and served a county with a population of 10 million.

Five years later, Lucas returned to San Diego County to serve again in the No. 2 spot before his recent elevation. Lucas’ salary will be \$443,940.

Lucas earned a medical degree from the University of Nevada School of Medicine. He completed a residency in anatomic and clinical pathology at UCLA Medical Center, as well as fellowship training in forensic pathology at New

York City’s medical examiner’s office, according to the county.

“Dr. Lucas brings a depth of expertise and leadership that makes him exceptionally well-suited for this role,” Andrew Strong, the deputy chief of the County Administrative Office who oversees public safety, said in a statement. “His experience in both San Diego and Los Angeles counties, along with his focus on innovation, training, and public health, will be a tremendous asset as we continue to strengthen the work of the Medical Examiner’s Office.”