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I just returned from a trip to Sacramento, where you can use the diamond lanes anytime except 6-10 a.m. and 3-7 p.m. Why should the northern part of the state have a better system than the South when we have twice the amount of traffic and worse drivers?

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Orange County Register

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1. High-Tech Camera Helps School Nab Parking Scofflaws

By Barbara Giasone

Orange County Register

Cal State Fullerton students who stack up unpaid parking tickets like fast-food coupons are the targets of new infrared camera technology that catches offenders in the click of a digital eye.

Mobile Plate Hunter 900, a progressive illuminated camera that resembles the Pixar movie character WALL-E, is mounted on a parking control vehicle that circles the campus lots.

The device can read 1,100 license plates per minute, and if the plate numbers correspond with offenders' names previously entered into a computer, an alert puts the vehicle on the "hot list" within milliseconds.

"If a student has five or more delinquent parking violations, the name is put into the computer," CSUF Parking and Transportation Director Joe Ferrer said. "The California Vehicle Code allows for agencies to immobilize or impound vehicles for these violations."

This year – its first in operation – the camera system identified 85 violations totaling \$36,610, a portion of the \$71,000 in parking ticket fines collected in the same period. The money subsidizes student, faculty and staff alternative transportation programs including the University Pass Program with the Orange County Transportation Authority and discounted Metrorail passes.

This is the same technology that some law-enforcement agencies use to combat terrorism and to monitor drug trafficking on the U.S.-Mexico border, said Lisa Quirindongo, a representative with manufacturer ELSAG. CSUF and Cal State Northridge are the only two universities in California to use the device, she said

2. Day Care Probed After Toddlers Found On Train Tracks

State regulators are looking into incident in which kids wandered off unnoticed.

By Serena Maria Daniels
Orange County Register

State regulators are investigating how two toddlers managed to escape from the sight of Anaheim daycare workers and wound up on nearby railroad tracks, where they were spotted by neighbors who alerted police.

The children were outside the grounds of the Anaheim YMCA Children's Station at 100 S. Atchison St. Thursday afternoon during group playtime when staff members noticed them missing during a routine headcount, said John Guastaferrro, a YMCA spokesman. Rosie Mendez, 36, said her son, 2-year-old Eric Beder Mendez, got out onto the railroad tracks with another 2-year-old boy. She said she arrived at the daycare center shortly after 5 p.m. on Thursday, unaware that her toddler was missing.

"I usually see him there playing on the playground, but this time I didn't," Mendez said. "I figured he would be in the classroom."

He wasn't there either.

That is when a staff member told Mendez that her child was somehow lost at 3 p.m., while daycare staff was outside with the children, and that police apparently had Eric and the other boy.

Police arrived moments later, with Eric, unharmed, though dirty. "The cop told me ... 'I'm not a believer, but I believe someone was watching over these kids'," Mendez said.

Mendez, who works for Anaheim Housing Authority, said no one from Children's Station called her. Neither did the police, although Anaheim police spokesman Sgt. Rick Martinez said police drove around the area trying to figure out where the toddlers belonged.

"I was in shock, I didn't know how to react," Mendez said. The tracks are used by the Metrolink commuter rail service, which runs trains about every half-hour on weekday afternoons.

A daycare staff member showed Mendez the area where the boys escaped – a broken wire fence that runs parallel to the tracks, on the north side of the daycare building, which used to be a railroad station.

Anaheim police received two phone calls about toddlers on the tracks Thursday, including one at 4:23 p.m. from a man and a woman at 700 E. Sycamore St., Martinez said. The couple stayed with the children until police arrived.

Guastafarro said the boys were missing no longer than 30 minutes. "We want to assure our parents that every safety protocol and procedure is currently being reviewed with all staff to ensure the continued safety of our children," Guastafarro said.

Guastafarro confirmed that the children were not inside daycare property, which is just north of Citrus Park, although he did not specify where the children were during playtime.

There is a grassy area nearby, close to the wire fence, where parents said the children play sometimes.

The daycare is working with the state's Community Care Licensing Division of the Department of Social Services to investigate the incident.

Lizelda Lopez, a Department of Social Services spokeswoman, said the division is looking into the incident and cannot comment until an investigation is completed.

Parents who bring their children to the daycare center were informed Friday by letter explaining that there was an incident involving two children and that they were unharmed, although the letter did not specify what happened.

On Monday morning, several parents learned of the incident for the first time. Darlene Gilchrist, who walked her year-and-a-half-year-old son to daycare, was shocked to read the letter for the first time Monday morning.

"That's scary," Gilchrist said as she looked over the letter. "That makes my hair stand up."

Josie Gutierrez, who brings her 7-month-old daughter to Children's Station, hadn't heard about the missing boys until Monday.

"That's not good. That means the assistants weren't looking," said Gutierrez. Children's Station, located in what used to be the Union Pacific Railroad Station in Anaheim, serves children between 2 months and 6 years old. Ninety children are served daily between 6:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., according to its Web site.

The site has five rooms: for infants, toddlers, those who have been potty-trained and preschoolers. The program is subsidized to provide low-cost and no-cost service to families.

Wenchi Mellon, an accountant and mother of Emily, who will be 2 next month, also got her hands on the letter on Monday.

"It's a hard job – we just have one (child) and that's exhausting," Mellon said. "We really appreciate the job the staff does."

Joel Zlotnik, a spokesman for the Orange County Transportation Authority, said the agency owns the right of way to the train tracks. Metrolink workers are typically charged with inspecting fences and performing maintenance, Zlotnik said, but OCTA crews performed a temporary fix of the fence on Monday.

A more permanent fix is scheduled for today.

Guastafarro said daycare staff set up cones and tied the fence closed as a temporary measure over the weekend.

3. Who Is That Guy In Tollbooth No. 2?

MORNING READ: O.C.'s oldest tollbooth operator makes lifelong friends, a few seconds at a time.

By Shane Scott
Orange County Register

Every work morning Joseph Morreale, 86, walks through a dark tunnel, eventually reaching a door and, behind it, a stairway that leads to a river of asphalt known as the 241 Eastern Toll Road.

He pushes a button next to a computer screen. "And now we're in business."
As Joe says this, a metal barrier in front of the booth, his booth – Booth No. 2 – rises, allowing the first cars of the day to slowly approach his window.

Every work day in a 4.5- by 10-foot room, in a uniform of off-white Hawaiian shirt and khaki pants, Joe takes \$2.75 from people trying to get somewhere fast, though not so fast that they've bought the gizmo that lets them drive through the toll sans human contact.

This has been Joe's part-time job for 13 years. He sees about 50 customers an hour, four hours a day times five days – or about 1,000 people per week. Many are first-timers on the toll road, or too disorganized to buy the gizmo, so they're paying cash. But others are regulars, people willing to slow down at Booth No. 2 simply because they want to see Joe.

And Joe sees them.

"You see the same people every day. That's what's nice about it."
And so it happens – in snippets, but repeated every day for many years – that Joe, the tollbooth guy, gets to know people.

"You chit chat a couple words...a conversation usually lasts for about six to 10 seconds."

Sometimes people go by without saying a word. But, sometimes, if there's no line, a driver and Joe will talk for five or 10 minutes.

And friendships develop. Joe has been to weddings, funerals, hospitals — all to see people who drive through Booth No. 2. And when Joe turned up in the hospital, his customers turned out to visit him.

He's seen people change. Boys become men. Girls become women, driving through with their husbands and, eventually, their kids. Joe has even played Cupid, recently talking up a regular driver who thought another regular driver was hot. Today, those drivers are engaged.

Naturally, Joe has an invitation

"Come around in two years and you'll see a baby."

Joe, at 86, is the oldest tollbooth guy in Orange County; maybe the country. And he wasn't always Joe the Tollbooth Guy. He's been many things to many people. Which raises a question:

Who is the guy in Booth No. 2?

•••

Joe was a sergeant in World War II, a guy in a tank who killed Nazis. He had a name for his tank: "Rosalie."

He was an engineering and math graduate from Columbia University; a computer-industry executive, an amateur painter, a mountain climber.

He was a salesman – head salesman, usually – at companies like Oki Data and Citizen Watch.

"In one week I would be in Chicago, Atlanta, New York..." Joe says.

Years later, he still misses the action, he says, if not the stress.

After he retired in 1985, Joe struggled with life's slower pace. He kept mountain climbing (he's been up Mt. Fuji and Mt. Rainier, among others), and he tried to stay busy by serving in the ministry of his local church.

"I was used to a rapid schedule," Joe says. "And things gradually came to a standstill." He fell into a new routine. He'd sleep till 10. He'd skip shaving. "I lacked discipline," he says.

Joe had another role, too. He has three children, now grown, and, after he remarried (in 1980, to Corliss) he was a man with the time and energy to be grandpa to several grandchildren who lived near his home in Lake Forest.

•••

"Another \$2.75?"

A regular, a middle-aged blonde, is asking. She's cheery.

"For you \$2.50. That's because I love you."

4. Oceanside: Tri-City Looks To Orange County For Financing

North County Times

Tri-City Medical Center is looking north to Orange County for a financial deal that could help the public hospital get out of the ruinous interest rates it is paying on about \$57 million outstanding bonds.

In a special meeting Tuesday, hospital directors voted 5-0 to hire Orange County attorney Phillip B. Greer to broker an \$80 million, one-year loan from the County of Orange at an as yet undisclosed interest rate.

Greer is also the personal attorney for Orange County Treasurer Tax-Collector Chriss Street, but Greer said Monday that that relationship would have no bearing on Tri-City's negotiations with the county.

Larry Anderson, Tri-City's CEO, said that a loan from Orange County could offer Tri-City much more favorable terms that are available from the commercial banking sector, which the public hospital has been trying to work with, to no avail, since January. Anderson said state law restricts counties in how they can invest the tax money sitting in their coffers.

Generally, only conservative investments, such as certificates of deposit, are allowed. But there is an exemption, Anderson said, for one government agency to loan cash to another.

Greg Moser, the hospital board's attorney, said he has worked several similar deals between government agencies in the past.

He said the financing method generally delivers an interest rate a half-percentage point greater than the rate the government agency is getting from its current investments. "I just checked and they're currently getting about 1.5 percent," Moser said. "The worst deal the county could offer us is definitely better than the best deal that we could get from the commercial market."

Orange County has not yet provided loan terms to Tri-City, but Greer said details, including an interest rate, and what collateral Tri-City would have to provide, should be available by the hospital board's upcoming regular meeting on Thursday.

Anderson said Orange County recently did a similar deal with the Orange County Transit Authority, and Moser said he recently represented a hospital district in Marin County that borrowed money from the Marin County Treasurer for similar purposes. Before voting with her colleagues to approve hiring Greer, hospital director Kathleen Sterling grilled the attorney about his clients, saying she feared a possible conflict of interest.

Greer said after the meeting that his representation of the hospital district and the treasurer, parties that both would be involved in any financing arrangement, was not a conflict of interest.

"I do not lobby Mr. Street," Greer said. "If he decides it's a viable deal, then it's a viable deal."

Sterling told Tri-City attorney Moser that she will hold him responsible for making sure that Greer brokers a clean deal.

According to the "engagement agreement" approved by the hospital board Monday, Greer will receive \$50,000 to work with the hospital to broker a deal with Orange County.

If the deal goes through by Sept. 9, Greer will receive an additional \$200,000 payment. Tri-City finds itself looking for a new lender after a previous refinancing arrangement went sour.

In 2007, on the advice of the investment bank Citigroup, Tri-City refinanced its debt, using auction-rate securities to obtain an interest rate that was estimated at 3.5 percent. Auction-rate securities break a long loan up into small pieces, selling them to investors in weekly or monthly chunks.

Because the terms are short, interest rates generally were much lower than they were for longer-term notes.

However, the market for auction-rate securities dried up in 2008 as national financial markets imploded under the weight of millions of subprime mortgages. Suddenly, Tri-City found itself paying more than 13 percent per month, amounting to more than \$400,000 extra per month.

Jeff Segall, Tri-City's vice president of public affairs, said Monday that the interest rate recently has dipped to 6 percent on news that the hospital is looking for refinancing. He said, however, that the hospital's finance department expects rates to shoot past 10 percent as bidders see that the hospital has been unable to get the loan refinanced through commercial lenders.

In its previous attempts at getting a commercial loan to refinance the debt, which paid for various construction projects at the hospital in the 1990s, Tri-City was asked to put up about \$50 million of its savings as collateral.

It was unclear whether that will be necessary with a deal from Orange County. Segall said that the hospital plans to borrow an additional \$23 million beyond the \$57 million that it will take to refinance the auction rate bonds so that Tri-City will have enough working capital to accomplish various improvements to its facilities.

Deborah Schoch of the Center for California Healthcare Journalism contributed to this report.

5. Steelhead Plan On Tap

By Fred Swegles
Orange County Register

Trestles may rank No. 1 as national treasure for surfing, but as a habitat for the endangered Southern California steelhead trout, the creek that feeds Trestles Beach is rated at 2 on a scale of 1 to 3.

The National Marine Fisheries Service invites the public to a workshop in Carlsbad today to look at a proposed habitat recovery program for steelhead in Southern California.

Steelhead can alternately live in the ocean and in rivers and creeks. During the "Save Trestles" campaign that halted extension of the 241 toll road to I-5 at San Onofre, steelhead were one of the threatened species cited by environmental groups as a reason for not putting the toll road there.

The federal recovery plan, drafted in July, lists rivers and creeks on a scale of 1 to 3 for priority and viability, with 1 being highest.

San Mateo Creek: Home to the famed Trestles surfing beach bordering San Clemente is listed as Core 2.

San Onofre Creek: Just south of Trestles, at Church Beach, Core 3.
San Juan Creek: At Doheny State Beach, Core 1.

Santa Ana River: On the border of Newport Beach and Huntington Beach, Core 2.
The recovery plan also rates other rivers and creeks up and down the Southern California coast.

"A Core 2 doesn't mean it's not important to the recovery," National Marine Fisheries' Mark Capelli said. "There's not that much difference between 1 and 2. It's largely a function of the size of the watershed. It's one of the smaller watersheds."

Core 1 watersheds include the Santa Maria River, Santa Ynez River, Ventura River, Santa Clara River, Carpinteria Creek, Rincon Creek, Malibu Creek, San Gabriel River and San Luis Rey River.

The report says "Core 1 and 2 watersheds form the foundation for recovery" of Southern California steelhead as a distinct population.

San Clemente's George Sutherland, who has been working for 22 years on steelhead recovery in the Trestles watershed, said he didn't know why San Mateo rated a Core 2, but a prolonged drought has created problems for San Mateo Creek's steelhead habitat. "The lower eight miles are dry most of the year," he said. "The estuary is unrecognizable. It's all dried up."

Today, the public can learn about the recovery plan and offer suggestions. The announcement of the workshop said biologists will explain what steps they believe are necessary to recover steelhead to remove them from the endangered list.

The workshop will be from 3 to 5 p.m. at the Carlsbad Fish & Wildlife Office, 6010 Hidden Valley Road, Carlsbad. For more info contact: jim.milbury@noaa.gov. Learn more at swr.nmfs.noaa.gov/recovery .

6. Widening Of 13-Mile Stretch Of I-215 Gets Ok For Final Design, Engineering

By Dug Begley
Riverside Press-Enterprise

Plans for how to widen Interstate 215 from Perris almost to Murrieta will be finished next summer, under a plan proposed by Riverside County Transportation Commission staff that increases the agency's work with an engineering firm.

The commission's budget committee on Monday approved a plan to have engineering firm URS finalize engineering and design of the project, from Scott Road north of Murrieta to Nuevo Road, north of Perris. The 13-mile stretch is the middle of three adjacent projects along I-215 to widen the freeway from Interstate 15 in Temecula to Highway 60 near Moreno Valley.

If approved by the commission at its meeting next month, URS will be paid up to \$14.5 million for the design and engineering work, said Lisa DaSilva, capital projects manager for the transportation agency. The company was chosen because it is already the on-call engineering firm for the transportation commission on major road projects. URS did similar design work on the southern segment of the I-215 widening project. "They have been making excellent progress," DaSilva said.

The middle phase of widening I-215 to three lanes and adding a carpool lane from Nuevo Road north to the 60 is the most complex of the three when it comes to design, said John Standiford, deputy director of the transportation commission. Bridges at D Street and Perris Boulevard in Perris must be lengthened to accommodate the larger freeway.

The entire widening project is expected to cost \$417 million, including \$38.6 million for the southern segment from California's Prop. 1B transportation bond voters approved in 2006.

Work on the southern section of the widening is set to start in 2011, followed a year later by the central section. Construction north of Perris to Riverside is not anticipated until 2012, with all phases finished by 2015.

7. Light-Rail Contracts Open To Small Businesses

By Jan Norman
Orange County Register

Small-business owners can find out how they can compete for a slice of the \$600 million in contracts for construction of the light-rail transit line from Pasadena to Azusa at a workshop at 8:30 a.m. Sept. 15 at the Doubletree Hotel, 924 W. Huntington Drive in Monrovia.

The Metro Gold Line Foothill Extension Construction Authority will host the workshop. Admission is free, but reservations are required. Call 714-973-1335 or click here for the web site.

8. Diamond Lane Debacle

Orange County Register (Letter to the Editor)

I just returned from a trip to Sacramento, where you can use the diamond lanes anytime except 6-10 a.m. and 3-7 p.m. Why should the northern part of the state have a better system than the South when we have twice the amount of traffic and worse drivers? OCTA and Caltrans must be manned by a bunch of idiots. The voters were ill-informed in giving these people 30 years of Measure M money. The diamond lanes are nothing more than a revenue raiser, if you want my opinion, and poorly run.

Hank Redding

Orange

9. Readers React To Planned Live Oak Canyon Upgrades

Commenters wary of increased signage.

By Rashi Kesarwani

Orange County Register

Readers shared their thoughts in the comments on a story about the county's proposed improvements to Live Oak Canyon Road. The narrow two-lane rural highway, where 10 people have died in traffic accidents in the last decade, should get a metal guardrail near Monastery curve, signs to warn drivers of upcoming curves and other upgrades, including tree trimming, a group of traffic safety experts recommended Thursday.

Here is what readers had to say:

"Live Oak Canyon upgrades suggested" (Aug 21) contained a lot of changes and suggestions to the dangerous traffic conditions on that road, but no solution. A true solution would be to downgrade the roadway in order to solve the speeding problem. None of the suggestions in that article are going to slow down a teenage kid with a powerful car. Signs and reflectors haven't worked before. Arrows just transform the road into their personal slalom course. A guardrail is one more thing to bash into.

Pat Forster, San Juan Capistrano

lightfootletters wrote:

Lets trim the trees over hanging the road and other things, I cant believe that is even a thought, that is one of the great beauty's of the road. I grew up in Modjeska Cyn I have had a couple of friends die on Trabuco Cyn road it is sad when it happens, why not just close down the end of the road and make it for locals only. So let me get this straight you give a 17 year old flatlander an \$80,000 dollar 500 + horse powered Shelby Mustang and he stuffs it into a tree and dies. Now it is the roads fault. I feel bad the kid was an idiot showing off his daddy's car to his friend. but to start carving up a forest that has been around much longer than most people in orange county is ridiculous . The only sign that should be there on the road is DRIVER BEWARE and leave it at that.

homeowner wrote:

People that don't adhere to the speed limit aren't going to pay attention to signs. Prob be better to install cameras and have CHP patrol.

mrmobile wrote:

Disfigure the most beautiful, scenic road in Southern California, with guardrails, signs, and 'paddles'? Why? Without exception, the deaths were caused by a disregard for safety, and a desire to prove superior driving skills. What good will more signs do, when the existing ones are ignored? I say we leave the road as-is. Beautiful and safe. Also, remove all those hideous "memorials". If those who have chosen to enter the next life on Live Oak must be memorialized, we can construct a big sign at both entrances, listing their names, and warning others who may choose to also disregard the laws.

ainokea wrote:

i ride to cook's corner on that road almost every day and i always see speeders going way too fast. it's only a matter of time that more people get killed. most of these so called 'accidents' are not accidents. they're caused by speeding on a winding, turning road.... it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what's going on there. put more cops there, have a road block there every weekend and you will see the death statistics go down. when everyone knows that there may be a cop or a road block there, trust me, all the idiots will go away. the only problem with that is that the idiots will go somewhere else to die. keep our kids away from these reckless speeding idiots like obsidian and the likes.

cranky420 wrote:

people just need to learn how to drive , or stay of this road !

homer92630 wrote:

Oh heck, why don't they just call it part of the county park and install a toll booth manned by a docent. Then each car can be escorted through the section of road. That would be safer. Right?

What's a guardrail going to do besides bounce some speeding car into the dirt embankment on the opposite side of the road. Worse yet, how about another head-on collision.