

NEWS BRIEFS

2 arrested in \$2 million movie ad scheme

SANTA MONICA—Two Southern California men have been indicted for allegedly defrauding Lionsgate Entertainment out of \$2 million in a kickback scheme involving the purchases of cardboard advertising displays. The FBI said in a press release that 31-year-old Roccia James Cuccia of Downey and Larry D. Collins of Northridge were arrested on March 23. They face charges including wire fraud, money laundering and tax evasion. Cuccia worked as a buyer at Lionsgate, a Santa Monica-based film company. The indictment says Cuccia used Collins as a vendor to supply cardboard advertising used to display Lionsgate movies at retail stores. Cuccia is accused of altering company computer files to artificially inflate the size of the orders, and therefore the payments, that went to Collins. In return, authorities say, Collins wired a portion of the money to Cuccia's bank account.

51 pounds of meth seized in Southern California

TEMECULA—More than 51 pounds of methamphetamine was seized as U.S. Border Patrol officials broke up two smuggling attempts along Southern California's Interstate 15. The Riverside Press-Enterprise reported 25 bundles of meth weighing 13 pounds were found on March 23 hidden in the gas tank of a car being towed by an SUV through the I-15 checkpoint in Temecula. The 31-year-old man driving the SUV is a Mexican national. On March 20 agents at the same Riverside County checkpoint discovered 38 pounds of the drug behind the rear panels of a car driven by a 40-year-old male U.S. citizen. The newspaper said the total street value of the meth is estimated at more than a million dollars. Officials did not say whether the two smuggling attempts were connected.

Gang member gets life in prison in drive-by murder

SANTA ANA—Prosecutors say a Santa Ana gang member has been sentenced to life in prison for the drive-by shooting murder of an innocent teenager who was mistaken for a rival gang member. Orange County district attorney spokeswoman Farrah Emami said 25-year-old Guillermo Brambila was sentenced on March 23, and will not be eligible for parole. A jury found Brambila guilty of conspiracy to commit murder, murder, attempted murder and other felonies on Jan. 24. In addition to his life sentence, he's sentenced to another 70 years to life. Brambila and fellow gang members drove into rival gang turf in 2007, looking for someone to shoot in retaliation for an earlier murder. They found 15-year-old Eric Guerrero and opened fire, shooting him in the chest and killing him. Guerrero was not a gang member.

NJ firm settles Calif. pension fund kickback case

SACRAMENTO—A New Jersey company that manages prescription benefits has agreed to pay \$2.7 million to settle an investigation

stemming from an influence-peddling case involving California's largest public pension fund. The California attorney general's office announced on March 23 that Medco Health Solutions Inc. also has agreed to change its internal procedures. The California Public Employees' Retirement System did not renew a contract with Medco last year after an investigation revealed the company paid more than \$4 million to Alfred Villalobos to help secure a prescription drug contract. Villalobos is a former CalPERS board member who acted as a middleman to help companies gain contracts with the pension fund. The state attorney general has charged him with setting up a system of kickbacks to gain influence with pension fund executives.

Report: Dodgers bidders down to 3

LOS ANGELES—The number of bidders for the Los Angeles Dodgers is reportedly down to three. The Los Angeles Times reported on March 23 that the three finalists include a group led by Magic Johnson and veteran baseball executive Stan Kasten; St. Louis Rams owner Stan Kroenke; and a group led by hedge-fund billionaire Steven Cohen and Los Angeles billionaire and philanthropist Patrick Soon-Shiong. In an unusual process agreed to last year by Major League Baseball and current Dodgers owner Frank McCourt, MLB will consider groups for approval before McCourt then selects the winner of the auction, which is likely to be for a price of more than \$1 billion. McCourt's agreement with MLB says the auction is to be completed by April 1 and the sale is to be closed by April 30.

April open for Expo line; links downtown, west LA

LOS ANGELES—LA's new Expo light rail line has been cleared for operation by state regulators and will open its first leg April 28. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa made the announcement on March 23 as he took his first ride on the 81/2-mile train line. It goes from downtown LA past the Staples Center, University of Southern California and the museums of Exposition Park, ending in Culver City. Officials hope the train will give relief to those weary of driving on the parallel Interstate 10. The \$932-million project, which connects with the existing Red, Blue and Purple lines, was begun in 2006 and had been expected to open last year. The \$1.5-billion second stage extending the train to Santa Monica is expected to be running by 2016.

Pioneering variety TV producer Bob Henry dies

LAGUNA BEACH—Bob Henry, a producer and director of television variety shows including "The Nat King Cole Show" and "The Flip Wilson Show," has died. A statement issued on March 20 from the Pageant of the Masters art festival where he was a director said Henry died on March 24 at his home in Laguna Beach. He was 92. Henry worked in television for more than five decades and was noted for bringing Black performers like Cole and Wilson to a wider audience. He produced, directed and wrote 1956's "Nat King Cole

Show" for NBC, which several network affiliates refused to air because of its Black star. Henry would later direct and produce variety shows for Andy Williams, the Carpenters, Glen Campbell and Barbara Mandrell, and also helmed telecasts of the Emmy and Grammy awards.

LA mayor tells fire chief to stop new info policy

LOS ANGELES—Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has ordered the fire department to stop a new policy of withholding key information on emergencies. A letter sent on March 21 from Villaraigosa told Fire Chief Brian Cummings to wait for the city attorney's opinion before implementing the policy. City News Service said the LAFD announced on March 20 that they had already begun limiting the release of information like locations of incidents and injury information in order to conform to federal medical privacy laws. Villaraigosa said in response that the department needs "more transparency, not less," and it is "our duty to provide information to the media and the public." City and fire officials had already been butting heads in recent days over the department's new methods of counting fast responses to emergency calls.

Airport security guard settles suit for \$200K

SANTA MONICA—A Black Santa Monica Airport security guard who claims the city denied him a promotion because of his race and age has settled the case for \$200,000.

The Santa Monica Daily Press said 56-year-old Vonnell Adams also agreed to leave his job as part of the settlement. Adams, who has worked at the airport for 17 years, sued the city in federal court two years ago claiming his supervisors circumvented normal promotion procedures by improperly promoting a Hispanic colleague. City Attorney Marsha Moutrie said on March 20 the case was strenuously contested by both sides.

Adams is currently on sick leave. His last day is March 30.

Herrera named California's first Hispanic poet laureate

SACRAMENTO—Writer, poet and activist Juan Felipe Herrera has been named California's first Hispanic poet laureate. Gov. Jerry Brown's office announced the appointment on March 21. The 63-year-old is the author of 28 books and currently serves as chairman of the creative writing department at the University of California, Riverside.

Herrera is the son of migrant workers from Mexico. He has received numerous national and international awards for his work documenting his experience as a Hispanic in the U.S. He also has won the National Book Critics Circle Award in Poetry. The governor's spokesman, Gil Duran, said Herrera is the first Hispanic to serve as California's poet laureate. The position requires Senate confirmation, and the California Arts Council provides an annual stipend of \$5,000.

El Camino Trustee Brown appointed to technology task force

From staff reports

TORRANCE—El Camino Community College District Trustee Ken Brown was recently appointed to a new education technology task force by State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson. The Education Technology Task Force will offer recommendations for how to bring 21st century tools into California's classrooms to improve teaching and learning.

Brown, an Inglewood resident and associate systems engineer with Booz Allen Hamilton, is part of the 48-member task force that includes teachers, administrators, technology directors, local and county superintendents, school board members, parents, researchers, policy advocates, and foundation and community members from throughout the state.

Members will assess the state's current education technology infrastructure and identify gaps between the current National Education Technology Plan and California's most recent plan, which was approved in 2005. The group also will assess future needs and recommend how to improve teaching, learning, and equal access to technology for all students.

Creation of the task force was among the goals set out in the Blueprint for Great Schools, a report on the future of education in California prepared by the Transition Advisory Team, a group of nearly 60 parents, teachers, and business and community leaders.

The blueprint calls for incorporating one-to-one technology as a key component of teaching, learning, and assessment that supports high levels of literacy, biliteracy, and prepares students for success in the global economy.

As part of its duties, the task force will compile input from stakeholders and experts in the field. The task force is expected to present recommendations to revise and develop a California Educational Technology Blueprint over the next few months, followed by a series of public meetings to gather comments on issues identified by the task force. The public may also contribute information, research, and case studies to the task force at: [CommentEdTech.myboe.org](http://commentedtech.myboe.org/) [http://commentedtech.myboe.org/]

For more information on the Education Technology Task Force, visit the California Department of Education website at www.cde.ca.gov/eo/in/et/index.asp.

High gas prices pinch college students' budgets

By John Rogers
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES—When Irma Gorrocino enrolled in college, gas was selling for about \$2.50 a gallon and commuting to a campus 30 miles from her Southern California home didn't seem like such a big deal.

Now, with the price hovering near \$4.50 a gallon, the 21-year-old junior at California State University, Northridge, acknowledges that she shudders every time she watches the needle on her aging Honda's fuel gauge move toward "E." And she's not alone.

Gorrocino is a member of a group that numbers in the tens of thousands: college students who commute to classes from their homes by driving, some as much as 60 or more miles a day, in a state where the automobile is still often the only quick way to get from Point A to Point B.

After seeing their tuition more than double in recent years, they have now seen gas prices increase more than a half-dollar a gallon in just the past 21/2 months. It is something that has many of them thinking less about studying and more about how they'll get to school.

"With the rising cost of tuition coupled with the rising cost of gas prices and the rising cost of textbooks, it's hard to focus on much more than that," said Gregory Washington, a senior political science major at California State University, Fullerton, who plans to become a lawyer. Washington, who has seen his tuition more than double to about \$6,700 a year since he enrolled at Fullerton, drives 30 miles each way from his home in California's Inland Empire.

Students like him and Gorrocino are among those hardest hit by the cost of fuel. The CSU system has on-campus housing for only about 10 percent of the 427,000 people who attend classes on its 23 campuses that are scattered across the state.

The schools, known as commuter campuses, also have little in the way of transit programs to accommodate students, although the Northridge campus, one of the system's largest with 34,000 students, is building a transit center it envisions will

eventually accommodate not only local transit buses but also commuter coaches that will carry students from as far away as 70 miles or more.

"But this is Los Angeles, not New York," said campus spokeswoman Carmen Ramos Chandler. "There isn't a subway station on every block and trains and buses that will take you anywhere you want to go."

In Gorrocino's case, it takes two subway trains, a bus and 21/2 hours to travel from her home near downtown Los Angeles to her campus in the northwestern corner of the city's San Fernando Valley. When she attended classes during the day she did make the marathon commute, but this year she is attending at night, meaning she wouldn't get home until after midnight.

"And in all honesty, it's not safe to do public transportation late in the evening," she said.

So she gasses up her 1997 Honda Accord with more than 215,000 miles on the odometer and hopes it will hold together for a few more months. Financially, she's surviving on a combination of student loans, scholarships, money from her parents and seasonal work as a lifeguard.

Before the spike in gas prices, a \$40 fill-up took her to school and back for a week. Now it takes two \$40 fill-ups, doubling her weekly school gas expense.

But she, like other students who drive, has found some innovative ways to balance that added expense.

"I don't pay to eat any more," she says, laughing. But she's serious.

Gorrocino, who likes to eat her lunch or dinner before class, used to buy it at a restaurant on or near campus every day. Now she scans campus flyers for any event that offers free food and crashes it.

She can usually find several such gatherings a week, she said, from marketers testing new food products on students to catered campus events. But just in case there aren't any that day, she arrives supplied with cheap snacks picked up at a discount warehouse store.

That, scoring tickets to concerts through radio call-in contests instead of buying them

and skipping luxuries like having her nails done has so far balanced out the increased weekly cost of gas.

For his part, Washington has eliminated lengthy trips to the beach, to Los Angeles and other areas, the goal being to cut back his driving to the extent it balances out the increasing cost of gas he needs to get to school. So far he says he's succeeded.

Still other students report they are turning to those traditional sources of quick student cash, financial aid loans that must be repaid after graduation and their parents' bank accounts, which will likely never be repaid.

At the University of California schools, where a third of undergraduates live on campus, there are also vanpool and carpool programs. The UCs in Los Angeles and San Francisco, for example, both offer vanpools that carry students and faculty to campus from as far away as 70 miles.

UCLA, with 170 such vans and subsidized fares for buses and trains, has perhaps the most extensive alternative transportation program of any university in the state. But officials there still estimate that about 25 percent of their 40,000 students drive to school each day.

To offset that, school officials are doing more to promote bicycling to campus for those close enough, providing secure stations to lock bikes at and other incentives.

At the University of California, Santa Cruz, for example, bicycling was never popular because students must pedal up a steep hill to get to the campus that overlooks the Pacific Ocean. So school officials have begun to attract more riders by putting a bike rack on a trailer that is towed by a van, allowing students to vanpool up the hill and then ride back down.

Perhaps the hardest hit group of students, though, are the 2.5 million who attend California's 112 community colleges. Only 11 campuses have student housing, which means almost everyone commutes.

On a recent day at Pasadena City College, the campus' multilevel garage was filled to capacity before noon, with a long line of cars, engines idling, waiting to get in.