

Supervisors vote to look at 1-cent sales tax increase for unincorporated areas of Kern

BY JOHN COX
jcox@bakersfield.com

Kern's Board of Supervisors began the process Tuesday of possibly putting a 1-cent sales tax increase on the November ballot that would apply only to the county's unincorporated areas and be overseen by a citizen's committee.

Nearly four years after county voters soundly rejected a similar measure, the board voted 4-0,

with Supervisor Mike Maggard absent, to have staff return Tuesday with a ballot proposal that would require approval by a simple majority of voters in unincorporated Kern.

Supervisor Leticia Perez made a motion to request the proposal after a series of county officials and others spoke of the need for "self-determination" to stabilize Kern's general fund and improve

local public services. That followed a staff presentation showing the county's tax revenues have declined steadily since 2014.

Other members of the board hesitated to second the motion, having expressed reservations with the idea of raising local taxes, especially at a time of soaring inflation. But then Supervisor Phillip Peters seconded Perez's motion and it won approval.

There was little indication on Tuesday's meeting agenda that the board was going to take up a tax increase. Instead, there was an item labeled as a "presentation on community engagement efforts, identified needs and public service prioritization."

When that agenda item came up, county staff led by Chief Administrative Officer Ryan Alsop took the board through the results

of public surveys last year and this year regarding what residents would like to see in terms of public services.

The top priorities that surfaced were public safety; mental health and addiction services for people who are homeless; roadwork; emergency medical response; and prevention of property

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2022 MADD awards

honor those who work to keep impaired drivers off the roads



CHP officers collect certificates of recognition from MADD following an awards ceremony at the Bakersfield Marriott at the Convention Center on Tuesday afternoon.

BY STEVEN MAYER
smayer@bakersfield.com

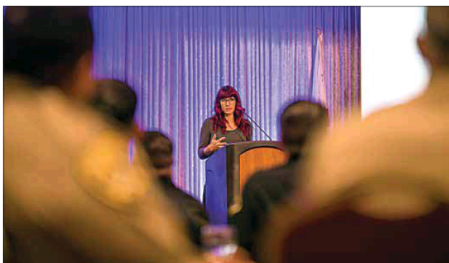
It must have seemed like just another Thursday morning as Taylor Embree drove on Comanche Drive toward his job in Arvin. It was about 4 a.m., Oct. 17, 2013.

His wife, Britney, was at home with the couple's 2-year-old son, Clayton, near the shores of Isabella Lake when she received a call from her husband's co-worker letting her know that Taylor had not shown up for work.

"The call sent me into a panic," she remembered.

After making more calls and getting no answers, Britney found someone to watch Clayton, jumped into her car and headed downriver toward what would become the worst day of her life.

She drove to Kern Medical, Bakersfield's trauma center, where she was eventually escorted to a small room away from the activity of patient care.



Britney Embree, a MADD victim volunteer, shares the story of her husband's death in 2013 when a vehicle driven by a drunk driver collided with his car, killing Taylor Embree on impact.

"When the door opened, my heart sank when a man with the word 'coroner' printed on his jacket walked in," she said.

She would eventually learn that a drunken motor-

ist, driving 90 mph with his headlights off, had slammed head-on into her husband's vehicle.

He "took the life of the most amazing man I had ever known," Embree told

a crowd of hundreds of law enforcement officers, criminal prosecutors and victim advocates at the 2022 MADD Central Valley/Kern County Law

Please see **MADD | A3**

Home market takes turn as interest rates rise

BY JOHN COX
jcox@bakersfield.com

Bakersfield's primary measure of local home prices took a dip last month that observers expect was the first of more to come amid expectations for continuing mortgage rates increases.

After holding steady or gaining in recent months, the median price of an existing home in the city dropped 1.5 percent to settle at \$385,000, which was still up more than 20 percent from the same month a year earlier, according to data from local appraiser Gary Crabtree.

The change coincided with new weakness statewide as higher interest rates made it harder for some buyers to qualify for a home loan. Although the state home price median rose 1.6 percent in May, partly because of continuing strength in sales of million-dollar homes, the volume of sales last month dropped nearly 10 percent month over month, according to the California Association of Realtors.

Industry observers blame mortgage rates that surged 50 basis points in a single week in early May, at that time the fastest jump

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UNEMPLOYMENT

California gets back \$1.1 billion in likely fraudulent benefits

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SCHOOL SHOOTING

Texas top cop: Uvalde police could've ended rampage much earlier

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COLLEGE HOOPS

Coleman ready for a familiar challenge at New Mexico Highlands

SPORTS | A7

'You guys ruined my life': Biological family files suit in boys' deaths

BY ISHANI DESAI
idesai@bakersfield.com

Ryan Dean says she misses everything about her babies.

"I miss them being all on me during visits, happy to see me," Dean said Tuesday. "I just miss being their mother and it was taken from me."

Dean's recollections came up during a press conference in San Francisco announcing she and her mother have filed a federal civil rights and wrongful death lawsuit seeking \$40 million in damages from the Kern County Department of Human Services, the California Department of



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

Social Services and her children's adoptive parents, as well as individual state and county officials.

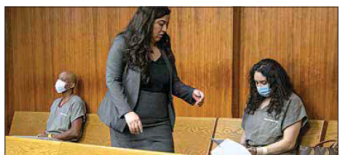
The suit alleges that California City brothers Orrin West, 4, and Orson West, 3, were unlawfully taken from Dean and placed with

adoptive parents who now face murder charges in the toddlers' deaths.

The government agencies named as defendants have been unable to address the accusations publicly. A spokeswoman for Kern DHS, Jana Slagle, has said the gag order imposed on the criminal case against the adoptive parents prohibits her from speaking.

Similarly, Theresa Mier, a spokeswoman for the State Department of Social Services, wrote in an email the department cannot comment on litigation.

Please see **BOYS | A3**



ROD THORNBURG / FOR THE CALIFORNIAN

Jacqueline and Trezell West, the adoptive parents of Orrin and Orson West, sit in Kern County Superior Court at their arraignment March 3. Alekxia Torres Stallings, the attorney for Jacqueline West, walks between the defendants.



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LOCAL / OBITUARIES

MADD

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 Enforcement Recognition Awards held Tuesday at the Bakersfield Marriott at the Convention Center.
 At Tuesday's event, MADD California honored dozens of local law enforcement officers and prosecutors for their efforts in helping to save the lives of potential victims.

"Today, we recognize the incredible efforts of law enforcement to get impaired drivers off the roads," said Barbara L. Rooney, director of the California Office of Traffic Safety. "Your efforts do not go unnoticed."

Last year, there were nearly 800 DUI checkpoints and focused enforcement efforts conducted across the state, resulting in close to 7,000 DUI arrests, she said.

Despite those efforts, drunken driving still accounts for about 30 percent of traffic deaths in the United States, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The awards come numerous, with two outstanding prosecutor awards going to Fresno County Deputy District Attorney Steven Uetzten and Kern County Supervising Deputy District Attorney Joseph Marcano.

The nod for outstanding officer went to Officer Matthew Iurrieta of the California Highway Patrol's Bakersfield office, while two officers were honored as outstanding rookies, Freddy Zamaripa of the Huron Police Department



ELIZA GREEN/THE CALIFORNIAN

CHP Officer Hugo Solario, left, receives one of two awards for "Top Cop" for DUI arrests in the Central Valley from CHP Central Division Chief Ceto Ortiz at Tuesday afternoon's MADD awards in downtown Bakersfield.

and Alvaro Ramirez of the Visalia Police Department.

MADD also honored the valley's Top Cop, who made the most DUI arrests, Bakersfield Police Department Officer Matthew Aquino, with 134 DUI arrests, and Coalinga-area CHP Officer Hugo Solario, with 107 DUI arrests.

Kern County Probation Supervisor Michael Ortiz was honored in the "outstanding probation" category, and three agencies were singled out for their outstanding dedication to DUI enforcement, including the Fresno PD, the Kern Regional Crime Labs Toxicology Analysis Unit, and the Kern County Coroner's Office.

Laurie Pinheiro, of MADD Central Valley, was recognized as outstanding MADD volunteer, while Gwen Plost, of the Fresno

County Probation Department, received the outstanding victim advocate award.

Assistance from the community is important as well, and three organizations were named corporate community champions. They are attorney Stephen Cornwell, of Freedman Law; Sikh Riders of America; and Punjabi Golf Association of Bakersfield.

Hundreds more law enforcement officers were recognized for their efforts in making DUI arrests. The total number of arrests reach into the several thousands.

For Britney Embree, MADD's goal of "No more victims" is personal, and she became a volunteer victim advocate in an effort to make a positive impact on the ongoing problem of impaired driving.

"She told the gathering that the officers who handled her family's case did so with 'gentleness, grace and patience.'"

"Everyone involved in Taylor's case was meticulous in everything that they did — and that takes time," she said.

She said she is "forever grateful" to everyone involved in her husband's case.

"The information in that over-400-page report served as undisputed evidence during trial," she said, "and that led to a murder conviction for the drunk driver who killed my husband."

"He is currently serving 15 years to life in prison thanks to everyone's hard work."

BOYS

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Adoptive parents Trezell West, 35, and Jacqueline West, 32, had pleaded not guilty each to a pair of second-degree murder charges, a single count of involuntary manslaughter, conspiracy, two counts of willful cruelty against a child and falsely reporting an emergency. They're trial is scheduled to begin July 25.

Kern County District Attorney Trudie Zimmer said in a May 10 news conference that the boys' bodies had not been found but her office secured a grand jury indictment against the adoptive parents.

Orrin and Orson West were officer reported missing in December 2020, but Zimmer said during the news conference they died three months prior to their adoptive parents stepping forward.

The plaintiffs in the federal lawsuit — Dean and the toddlers' maternal grandmother, Dana Moorer — had filed a claim in Kern

County before suing Friday in the United States Eastern District of California. The suit alleges the biological families' civil rights were violated.

The plaintiffs' attorney, Waukeen McCoy, told The Californian he has not yet received documents from Kern County that support certain allegations made in the federal lawsuit.

"I don't why there is this secrecy, lack of transparency surrounding these two children," McCoy said. Orrin, whose biological name was Cinsere, was first taken away from Dean after she brought him to Bakersfield Memorial Hospital because both his legs were broken, according to the lawsuit. He suffered no other injuries, the lawsuit said, but hospital staff said "they believed he had been abused."

Orrin was placed into the care of another woman and Dean was allowed to visit him two to three times a week, the lawsuit said. Dean believed her son was in good condition and began the process of reunification, the lawsuit added.

Dean gave birth to Orson, whose birth name is Classic, in June 2017. He was taken away by a Kern County Sheriff's deputy soon after he was born because "they like to keep siblings together," the lawsuit said. In late 2019, the boys were placed with their adoptive parents, the lawsuit added.

McCoy said during Tuesday's news conference that Moorer completed the process to get the children placed into her home. But Kern County Child Protective Services denied her request, according to the lawsuit.

"I just want answers," Moorer said during the news conference. "Why? Why Kern County? What was the purpose of not giving them to me when my house was approved to have them?"

The toddlers' biological family demanded accountability during Tuesday's press conference.

"You guys ruined my life," Dean said of the defendants.

TAX

Continued from PAGE A1

crimes. It was noted that residents of the county's unincorporated areas lack the breadth and depth of services available to people living in cities.

Next, staff showed that the county's discretionary income has fallen since 2014, when a drop in global oil prices led to a sharp decline in Kern property tax revenues. The point was made that the oil industry's prospects have continued to decline as the New-son administration has targeted in-state oil production, while a statewide property tax exemption on utility-scale solar installations has deprived Kern of an estimated \$20 million per year in revenue.

The bottom line was that county government's discretionary revenue has stagnated during the past seven years, slipping 6 percent to hit about \$392 million. That figure represents about 12 percent of Kern's total budget.

Staff noted that 34 of California's 58 counties charge more than the state's 7.25 percent sales tax, and that some of those that don't,

like Ventura County, generally don't need to levy a higher tax because they already bring in enough money to support ample public services.

Also laid much of the blame with Sacramento, saying the state continues to push unfunded mandates that cost Kern up to \$500 million per year, and that the oil and gas industry is being "regulated into extinction" with slow permitting and bans on certain oil field techniques common locally.

He said the sales tax proposal would create an advisory committee to "assist with full transparency" on how the new revenues would be spent.

Among the officials who spoke in support of raising more tax money locally was county District Attorney Cynthia Zimmer, who said it's imperative that Kern have money available to recruit and retain specialized staff.

Dave Nelson, president of the Kern County Firefighters Association, said his group is generally against raising taxes, but that it can support the 1-cent sales tax proposal.

"We need to do something to address those

(public services) issues," he said. "We're under the stranglehold of legislation that's not going to go away."

Kern's director of planning and natural resources, Loretta Oviatt, said the county needs to stabilize its general fund because investors who would otherwise put money into developing projects locally won't do so if we have the kind of crime and the kind of challenges" being experienced now in the county's unincorporated areas.

"I support this idea of self-determination," she told the board.

Peters initially resisted endorsing the idea of a sales tax increase, saying he had more questions than answers for staff. He said it was important to show voters what the county has done to address its needs short of raising more money from taxpayers.

But, he said, "I definitely understand the need, and I definitely want to do whatever we can to help support our public safety and our courts."

Supervisor David Couch said he had similar concerns but that he agreed public safety is the main priority.

RATES

Continued from PAGE A1

since 1987. Last week, the Federal Reserve raised the country's benchmark interest rate by another 75 basis points.

"Higher mortgage rates will lead to more moderations in housing activity while easing price growth, as the market finds more balance between supply and demand," Anna Albair, president of the Bakersfield Association of Realtors, said in a statement Tuesday.

She added that, as inflation becomes more entrenched in the economy, weighing down consumer spending, BARR expects additional interest rate hikes aimed at countering higher prices.

"While the underlying fundamentals remains solid so far, there is no doubt that an economic slowdown is forthcoming in the next few quarters, Albair stated.

Crabtree's market report noted the supply of homes for sale in Bakersfield rose more than 37 percent in May to reach 609 listings, which represented a year-over-year increase of 118 percent.

Meanwhile, demand



ELIZA GREEN/THE CALIFORNIAN

A for sale sign is pitched in the front yard of 2920 18th St. in Bakersfield's downtown neighborhood.

as measured by closed sales of existing homes fell 7.5 percent month over month. Sales of new homes, however, increased more than 23 percent; similarly, the median price of a newly built home actually increased 2.1 percent in May to hit \$460,100.

Crabtree noted local housing affordability has plummeted as the cost of living increased almost 9 percent in the 12 months ended in May. He observed that rising costs are "beginning to impact the market as offers above list price and multiple offers decline."

"With 60 years of market experience, I can't recall a more abrupt short-term

change" in the market, he wrote.

The state association said in a news release Thursday that the state's housing market "started showing signs of a market shift in May" as the monthly average 30-year fixed-rate mortgage topped 5 percent for first time since April 2010.

The group pointed to tight supply and higher borrowing costs as the main reasons for the change. President Otto Catrina also pointed to fewer and less intense bidding wars.

"We're beginning to see signs of a more balanced housing market with fewer homes selling above list price and homes remaining on the market a little longer than in previous months," he stated in the release.

CARVice President and chief economist Jordan Levine predicted fewer buyers will qualify for home loans in the near term.

"With the Fed expected to raise rates further in the second half of the year, the 30-year fixed rate mortgage could surge past 6 percent by year's end and lead to more affordability challenges for potential homebuyers," Levine wrote.

HAROLD LEROY HINELINE

March 29, 1935 - June 11, 2022

Harold Leroy Hineline, Born March 29, 1935 in Ruskin, Nebraska, a retired mortician who loved his wife, trials to Cayucos and spending time with his family. He proudly served in the military from 1957 to 1959. He went to be with the Lord on Saturday, June 11, 2022. He is survived by his wife Dolores Hineline; his brother and sister-in-law Lester and Lila Hineline; his children Elaine & Mark Hertz, Kristine & Robert Lynch, Anna & Dally Brown, Sophie Williams, Paul & Terry Aguilar; 16 grandchildren and 11 great-grandchildren and many loving relatives and friends.

A celebration of life will take place on Friday, June 24, 2022 at 4:00p.m. at The Lodge at Four Seasons, 10550 Toscana Dr., Bakersfield, CA. In lieu of flowers, contributions in Harold's name may be made to the Bakersfield Homeless Shelter at www.bahkc.org

www.bakersfield.com/obits

JEFF ROBINSON

June 5, 1956 - May 25, 2022

Jeff passed away May 25th at home with his family by his side. Jeff was born in Bakersfield, CA on June 5, 1956. Jeff attended Foothill High School. Jeff met Debbie in 1978, fell in love, were married in 1980, they shared a very special love in 42 years of Marriage. Debbie and Jeff have three children, Jessica Crenshaw, (husband Todd), Mitch Robinson, (wife Shelly), and Chase Robinson. Jeff and Debbie are Grandparents of 12 Grandkids, Josh, Jake, Ben, Allie, Cody, Savannah, Bradley, Maddie, Caylynn, Rylann, Peyton and Ira. Jeff was a Loving Husband, Dad, and Grandpa.

Jeff worked starting at a young age, Edison Drive-In Theater, worked alongside his Grandpa and Dad at Blackie's Pumping Service, then with his Dad at Robbie's Pumping Service. Jeff then went into traffic control at Flashco and worked many years in the Traffic Control Industry, where he made so many great friends.

Jeff has so many longtime friendships, either through childhood, work, and of course riding his Harley Davidson Motorcycle. Jeff had a great smile and a heart that was full of love and laughter. His love and hugs were unconditional. Jessica, Todd, Mitch, Shelly, Chase, and all Grandkids along with family and friends. Jeff always gave the BEST Hugs!

Jeff is preceded in death by his Dad (Harry Robinson), Mom (Mary Robinson), Sister (Kelly Johnson), Mother in Law (Mildred Simonson), and Father in Law (Ike Simonson).

The family would like to thank Hoffman Hospice and Dr. David Nilsson for their compassionate care.

There will be a Celebration of Life, June 25th, 2022 from 12:00 - 3:00 pm at the Prohibition-1933 Hall, 7900 Downing Avenue, Unit B, Bakersfield, CA. Please come and celebrate Jeff and share your memories with everyone. Jeff will be missed but never forgotten.

Jeff & Debbie Forever
 www.bakersfield.com/obits

SERVICES SCHEDULED

James Edward Lofy, Dec. 21, 2020. Funeral services are 10 a.m. Friday at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church with graveside to follow at Hillcrest Memorial Park. Hillcrest Memorial Park and Mortuary.

SERVICES PENDING

Renton R. Lopez, 17, Bakersfield, June 19. Greenlawn Funeral Home Northeast.

Leo Junior Tate, 85, Bakersfield, June 18. Greenlawn Funeral Home Northeast

TO OUR READERS

The Californian provides free death listings supplied by local mortuaries. To place an Obituary or in Loving Memory, call 395-7302. They will be posted at Bakersfield.com at 9 p.m. on the day before publication.

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