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DID THE MOUNTAIN WEST JUST KICK OUT AZTECS?

Conference, SDSU at odds over letter sent by university president

BY MARK ZEIGLER

Has San Diego State left the Mountain West?

Or has the Mountain West booted San Diego State?

It's a fair question, and one that currently doesn't have a definitive answer. The Mountain West certainly thinks SDSU is gone, sending the university a second letter saying it is initiating separation procedures for the school's departure in the 2024-2025 academic year.



John David Wicker

What does SDSU say?

We don't know. It's not commenting.

It is the latest twist in a growing drama about SDSU's quest to leave the Mountain West for a "power" conference that offers a more lucrative annual media rights distribution, preferably by 2024-25.

Before, the question was whether SDSU would be swept up in conference realignment and receive an expansion invitation from the Pac-12 or Big 12. Now it's suddenly become: Did the Mountain West just kick out its marquee school?

Mountain West bylaws require an exit fee of three times the average annual payout per school, or roughly \$17 million, if you give one-year notification by June 30. After that, the fee doubles.

So if SDSU provides notification by June 30, it would spend the upcoming 2023-24 season in the Mountain West and then leave in 2024-25 for a \$17 million exit fee. It could still depart after June 30, but it would cost \$34 million for 2024-25 or they'd have to wait until 2025-26 for \$17 million.

"We can't pay the (extra) amount," Athletic Director John David Wicker said recently of a projected 2024-25 departure. "Everyone is aware of that, so we're continuing to have conversations about that."

With the June 30 deadline rapidly approaching, multiple conference sources said President Adela de la Torre sent a letter to Mountain West Commissioner Gloria Nevarez and all 11 other presidents.

SEE SDSU • A6

"It's such a big piece of their budget that they rely on that's going away."

Allison Glader • strategic marketing and communications consultant at Feeding San Diego



K.C. ALFRED U-T FILE

Shelley Miller-Odelson stocks produce at Jewish Family Service's Corner Market. The organization is ramping up its charity service in the wake of the end of pandemic-era benefits.

THOUSANDS FACING 'MASSIVE BENEFITS CLIFF'

Food banks scramble to keep up as pandemic-era income supplements end

BY EMILY ALVARENGA

San Ysidro resident Gina has worked hard all her life, cleaning houses, providing child care and doing whatever odd job she could find.

Now, the 64-year-old, who asked to be identified by only her first name, is disabled. "It's not that I don't want to work — I can't," she said. "I depend on the government's help."

Yet every month she's struggling to scrape together enough money to feed herself — especially in the last several months.

For Gina and thousands of low-income San Diegans like her, that's been particularly hard since March, when their food benefits dropped by hundreds of dollars every month. The end of a pandemic-era boost in their allotments has left them without vital funds as food costs have soared — and left many increasingly reliant on local food banks and pantries.

"With two trips to the grocery store, my money is already gone,

so for the rest of the month I have to eat what I have left over," Gina said. "It's extremely difficult for me."

For three years, since March 2020, emergency COVID-19 relief had provided low-income families with a higher-than-usual monthly allotment of CalFresh benefits — the state's version of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps. About 388,000 people in San Diego County were receiving monthly benefits as of November, according to the state — almost 1 in every 8 residents.

And the emergency allotments made up a sizable chunk of the benefits San Diegans were getting — more than a fifth of all the food assistance provided countywide in the third quarter of last year, the San Diego Hunger Coalition estimates.

Beginning in March, CalFresh recipients saw a sudden and dramatic drop in food allowances as they reverted back to pre-pandemic levels, slashing the aver-

age recipient's monthly grocery budget by about \$100 for individuals and \$200 for families. The decrease was even steeper for seniors, some of whose monthly benefits dropped from \$281 to as low as \$23.

This — coupled with rising food costs — has resulted in tremendous financial strain on thousands of San Diego families in need and made food donations more critical than ever, according to local food assistance organizations.

Families are now turning to local food banks, pantries and other organizations that provide free food for help — and those organizations have been working overtime to maximize available resources to ensure food insecurity doesn't worsen.

"It's such a big piece of their budget that they rely on that's going away," said Allison Glader, strategic marketing and communications consultant at Feeding San Diego. "It is very devastating for so many of these families."

SEE BENEFITS • A6

BIDEN PLEDGES FUNDS FOR CLIMATE ACTION

President announces \$600M for adaptation efforts during Calif. visit

U-T NEWS SERVICES

PALO ALTO

On his first trip to California since announcing his re-election campaign, President Joe Biden Monday announced \$600 million in federal funding to fight the effects of climate change after touring a Northern California nature reserve with Gov. Gavin Newsom.

Touring coastal wetlands, Joe Biden sought to tout his environmental record and offer assurances that bills he signed during the first two years of his presidency would help communities protect themselves from natural disasters for decades to come.

"The impacts we're seeing from climate change are only going to get more frequent, more ferocious and more costly," Biden said during a visit to the Lucy Evans Baylands Nature Interpretive Center and Preserve, adding that his efforts to boost resilience would turn "peril into progress."

During brief remarks, Biden announced more than \$600 million for climate adaptation projects as part of his visit to the San Francisco Bay Area, a three-day trip that also was slated to include several political fundraisers.

The three-day trip, which was slated to include several political fundraisers, served the dual purpose of allowing Biden to showcase his legislative record on the environment while also bolstering his political position with a key constituency ahead of his re-election bid. In recent weeks, Biden has made similar moves to high-

SEE BIDEN • A7



SUSAN WALSH AP

President Joe Biden speaks at the Lucy Evans Baylands Nature Interpretive Center and Preserve in Palo Alto.

BUSINESS



BELMONT PARK HAS ITS EYE ON FUTURE

■ C1 • The Mission Beach boardwalk attraction, which is celebrating its 98th anniversary this summer, is revamping some of its rides and arcade features, and putting more of an emphasis on San Diego culture.

VESSEL VANISHES NEAR TITANIC WRECK

Search under way for submersible with five people on board

THE NEW YORK TIMES

A submersible vessel carrying five people slipped into the dark waters of the North Atlantic, heading to what remained of the Titanic, 12,500 feet under the sea. The expedition, like many before it, was a testament to the enduring fascination with the storied ship that struck an iceberg and sank off Newfoundland more than a century ago.

But one hour and 45 minutes into the dive Sunday morning,

the craft went missing, setting off a search by rescue crews from two countries and adding another layer of mystery and intrigue to the Titanic wreck.

Among those on board was Hamish Harding, a British aviation tycoon who took part in Blue Origin's fifth human spaceflight last year and holds several Guinness World Records, including for the longest time spent traversing the deepest part of the ocean on a single dive.

In social media posts, Harding had written excitedly about the upcoming trip: "I am proud to finally announce that I joined @oceangateexped for their RMS TITANIC mission as

SEE VESSEL • A6



This photo provided by OceanGate Expeditions shows the company's Titan submersible, which disappeared off the coast of southeastern Canada on Sunday.

DIGITAL ACTIVATION

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San Diego Oasis RANCHO BERNARDO GRAND OPENING. Saturday, June 24 | 10 AM | 17170 Bernardo Center Drive | San Diego. Special Speakers Mayor Todd Gloria & Ken Druck, PhD | RSVP | sandiegooasis.org. Connecting the 50+ Community in San Diego County.

SDSU

FROM A1

dents last week indicating SDSU's "intent" to leave the conference and inquiring about the flexibility in the exit terms.

The Mountain West consulted its legal counsel and wrote back, informing SDSU that it interpreted the letter as a notification of departure, which, according to the bylaws, must be sent to the commissioner and the 11 other presidents (and it was).

That triggered two events: SDSU was informed that the conference would withhold its 2022-23 distribution (estimated at \$6 million) toward the exit fee, and de la Torre was removed from the conference's board.

De la Torre quickly wrote back disputing the semantics, insisting SDSU had not formally withdrawn from the conference — it had merely expressed the possibility — while asking again about an extension to the June 30 deadline and payment plan for the exit fees.

The Mountain West, as

first reported by ESPN on Monday, replied by essentially saying there would be no wiggle room on the exit terms and, by the way, we still think you formally notified us of your departure.

It may all be moot a week from Friday, when the June 30 deadline arrives. There's one problem with that, though: SDSU might be paying \$17 million to leave a conference without another one to join.

The Pac-12 has not extended a formal invitation and likely can't until it first finalizes a new media rights

deal for 2024-25, when USC and UCLA depart for the Big Ten. Then it must get the remaining members to agree to it, and only then would it vote on expansion.

SDSU has argued that it deserves leniency from the Mountain West, since its run to basketball's national championship game in April earned the conference an estimated \$10 million in NCAA Tournament distributions over the next six years — the bulk of which SDSU wouldn't see if it joins another conference. The Mountain West has argued that if

SDSU leaves, the media rights deal with CBS and Fox could be restructured for less money in a worsening economy and the exit fee is a way to recoup some of that loss.

One person on social media put it like this: "Why in the world would they renegotiate the pre-nup?"

SDSU could take a leap of faith and finalize the divorce by June 30 without resolution in the Pac-12, potentially saving \$17 million if it left later this summer. But that option is freighted with risk in the ever-volatile

world of conference realignment.

The Pac-12 may implode if the media rights deal is deemed inadequate and members are poached by the Big 12 or other conferences. The Pac-12 may stick together and decide against expansion. Or the Pac-12 may indeed invite SDSU but make a lowball offer for an annual distribution share — reasoning that the Aztecs, having nowhere else to go, have lost negotiating leverage.

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BENEFITS

FROM A1

Now, Glader said San Diegans are "facing a massive benefits cliff" with the end of emergency allotments.

Tackling a growing need

The Jacobs & Cushman San Diego Food Bank has begun seeing a greater need since the emergency food allotments ended and is currently serving more than 400,000 San Diegans each month, CEO Casey Castillo told The San Diego Union-Tribune last month.

The same is true at Feeding San Diego. People who used to be donors now need food donations themselves, Glader said. In April alone, the nonprofit distributed 2.6 million pounds of food.

Although the nonprofit rescues 70 percent of its food from businesses and farms with a surplus, inflation has affected its food purchasing power, and that in turn means they can feed fewer people, according to Glader. And over the past year, transportation and packing costs have doubled.

"Our donations are also drastically down, because people are just not able to give as much as they were before," Glader added. "We also have smaller donors that aren't giving at all, because they need to just put food on their own table."

The nonprofit began ramping up food distributions at events and its community marketplace during the pandemic, but Feeding San Diego is reporting these large-scale distribution events are now seeing even more attendance than they did at the height of the pandemic.

California consistently has one of the nation's lowest rates of SNAP participation among people eligible for assistance. Only about 70 percent of eligible California households receive benefits — lower than the national average of 82 percent. And only 59 percent of the state's eligible low-income working people and 19 percent of eligible seniors are enrolled.

And locally, the San Diego Hunger Coalition estimated that as of last fall, more than a fifth of county residents, or 726,000, were "nutrition insecure" — a technical word for "hungry" that means they couldn't afford to eat three healthy meals per day.

That's why Feeding San Diego has recently grown its CalFresh team to conduct more community outreach at



JOHN GIBBINS U-T FILE

CalFresh, the state's version of federal food assistance, stopped emergency allotments in March. The sudden and dramatic drop in benefits made thousands dependent on food charities such as Feeding San Diego.

events across the county and at its food distributions. That team helps people determine if they qualify, complete the application process and ultimately stay enrolled.

Feeding San Diego is also supporting youths in need, setting up school pantries where students can not only get meals for themselves but also pick up food for their families. "You figure if the kids qualify for free and reduced meals, the rest of the family probably could really use help, too," Glader said.

This summer, the nonprofit will be feeding youths at 28 meal sites across the county that are part of the summer food service program — which will provide extra food for school children during summer months — that took effect with the end of the SNAP emergency allotments.

Jewish Family Service is also ramping up for the influx in clients, making its grocery-style food pantry in Kearny Mesa more accessible to families by expanding its evening hours five days a week as well as its online order capacity.

The organization's Corner Market is one of a few food pantries in San Diego set up like a miniature grocery store, where clients can "shop" for the specific groceries they need, said Kristine Stensberg, the nonprofit's senior director of nutri-



K.C. ALFRED U-T FILE

Jonathan Hake stocks food at the Jewish Family Service's Corner Market, an appointment-only market where clients can browse aisles.

tion and aging care services. "It's really about letting people pick out what they want based on their needs ... like if they have any chronic illnesses," she said.

At the market, open Monday through Friday by appointment only, clients can browse aisles stocked with proteins, including kosher meats, dairy products, fresh fruits and vegetables, canned goods and other necessities, like pet food and diapers. Online ordering with curbside pickup is also offered.

The market is based on a points system, and clients each get a certain allotment based on their household size.

"As the SNAP benefits are going away, people are trying to stretch all of their limited resources as much as possible," Stensberg said.

A registered dietician is available to help shoppers figure out how to create nutritious meals within their budgets. Volunteers also help clients shop and pre-wash items that will help them get the most out of

their available points.

"People who are coming in are actually making choices about their food consumption, about their health, and they're shopping with dignity as opposed to just being handed a bag," said Shelley Miller-Odelson, who has volunteered at the market for nearly a decade. "So they're very, very appreciative."

She gets to help clients get comfortable learning how to prepare vegetables or meat, for instance. "They get excited to try something new," she said.

VESSEL

FROM A1

a mission specialist on the sub going down to the Titanic," he said on Instagram, adding: "More expedition updates to follow, IF the weather holds."

Harding said in another post that Paul Henry Nargeolet, a French expert on the Titanic, had been expected to be on the vessel that disappeared.

On Monday, officials had no explanation for why the craft, called the Titan, lost contact with its Canadian expedition ship on the surface, MV Polar Prince, about 400 miles south of St. John's, Newfoundland.

But a spokesperson for the U.S. Coast Guard, Rear Adm. John Mauger, said at a news conference that the people on the vessel, which was designed to survive an emergency for 96 hours, would theoretically have at least 70 to 96 hours of oxygen before the situation became dire.

"We're using that time making the best use of every moment of that time," he said.

The Coast Guard was coordinating with Canadian authorities and commercial vessels to help search an area approximately 900 miles east of Cape Cod, at a depth of roughly 13,000 feet, he said. Sonar buoys were deployed into the water, and the expedition ship was using sonar to try to locate the submersible. Aircraft from

the United States and Canada, along with surface vessels, were scanning the waves in case the submersible had surfaced and lost communications, he said.

"We are doing everything we can do," Mauger said at the news conference, adding that it was "a challenge to conduct a search in that remote area, but we are deploying all available assets to make sure that we can locate the craft and rescue the people on board."

Officials have not released the names of those on the craft, but Harding, chair of a Dubai, United Arab Emirates-based sales and air operations company, Action Aviation, was confirmed as being on board the missing submersible by Mark Butler, managing director of the company.

The 21-foot craft is operated by a Washington state-based company, OceanGate Expeditions, which offers tours of shipwrecks and underwater canyons for \$250,000 a person. OceanGate calls the Titan the only crewed submersible in the world that can take five people as deep as 4,000 meters — or more than 13,100 feet — enabling it to reach almost 50 percent of the world's oceans. The vessel usually carries a pilot, three paying guests and a "content expert."

In a statement Monday, OceanGate said: "Our entire focus is on the crew members in the submersible and their families. We are deeply thankful for the extensive assist-



STEVEN SENNE AP

U.S. Coast Guard Rear Adm. John Mauger, commander of the First Coast Guard District, discusses the search for the submersible Monday in Boston.

ance we have received from several government agencies and deep sea companies in our efforts to reestablish contact with the submersible."

The Marine Institute at the Memorial University of Newfoundland in Canada, which partnered with OceanGate on the trip, said in a statement that it became aware Monday morning that OceanGate had lost contact with its Titan submersible. "We have no further information on the status of the submersible or personnel," it said in a statement.

RMS Titanic, a luxury liner and the world's largest ship when built, struck an iceberg and sank April 15, 1912, on its maiden voyage from Southampton, England, to New York City. For decades afterward, searchers explored the

North Atlantic for the ship's wreck on the ocean floor.

Finally, in 1985, a team took undersea robots to depths of more than 12,000 feet and verified that the broken hulk it had found less than 400 miles from Newfoundland was, indeed, the Titanic of lore.

The deteriorating ruin of the Titanic lies in waters some 2½ miles deep — far deeper than ordinary submarines can venture. At that depth, the water pressure is hundreds of times as high as it is just below the surface.

A submersible traveling down to the Titanic faces soaring, crushing pressure during its long descent. At the ship's resting place, the weight of the icy ocean pressing down would be equal to a tower of solid lead overhead rising to the height of the Em-

pire State Building.

Typically, searchers and researchers looking in such inky depths rely on advanced robots that use remote-controlled television, photography and sonar-mapping systems that can survive the crushing pressures and pierce the darkness. But such exploratory work is expensive and often frustrating.

For 111 years, the Titanic shipwreck has garnered intense interest among researchers and treasure hunters captivated by its tragic history: the horror of the accident, the inadequacy of the lifeboats, the supposed hubris of the ship's builders and operators, the enormous wealth of many and the poverty of others on board, and the deadly indifference of the iceberg and the sea.

Tourists were paying for dives by submersible in the early 2000s. Salvage crews hunted for artifacts to bring back up, over the objections of preservationists who said the wreck should be honored as the graveyard of more than 1,500 people. Researchers said the site was littered with beer and soda bottles and the remains of salvage efforts, including weights, chains and cargo nets.

James Cameron, the award-winning director, reinvigorated interest in the ship with his 1997 film "Titanic." Cameron's cinematic hit imbued the wreck with a new story of romance and tragedy, renewing interest far beyond those with an interest in famous maritime accidents.

By the early 2000s, scientists were warning that visitors were a threat to the wreck, saying that gaping holes had opened up in the decks, walls had crumpled, and that rusticles — icicle-shaped structures of rust — were spreading all over the ship.

By the time OceanGate Expeditions, a private company founded in 2009, began offering tours to paying customers, researchers said that the Titanic had little scientific value compared with other sites. But cultural interest in the ship remains extraordinarily high.

Last summer, the president of OceanGate, Stockton Rush, told The New York Times that private exploration was needed to continue feeding public fascination with the wreck site.

He compared the OceanGate trips to space tourism, saying the commercial voyages were the first step to expanding the use of the submersibles for industrial activities, such as inspecting and maintaining underwater oil rigs.

The dives offered by the company last about eight hours, including the estimated 2½ hours each way it takes to descend and ascend. Scientists and historians provide context on the trip and some conduct research at the site, which has become a reef that is home to many organisms. The team also documents the wreckage with high-definition cameras to monitor its decay and capture it in detail.