

## Valley farmland consolidations could save water and promote solar energy

BY JOHN COX  
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Hopes are rising in the southern Central Valley that the farmland expected to be fallowed in coming years because of drought and groundwater restrictions won't sit idle but will instead be consolidated to make room for new land uses including solar power generation. Efforts are underway locally

to create a system for piecing together parcels that would allow investment at a scale large enough to support substantial photovoltaic solar arrays — or ranching or creation of natural habitat, whatever makes sense financially for landowners.

A key consideration in the discussions is making sure farmers don't lose their right to the groundwater beneath their fal-

lowed land. A model now under development envisions a system of water credits and the involvement of a shared-benefit solar power organization.

The new modeling has come at a time of heightened optimism about the potential for large-scale solar farms in the Central Valley. Gov. Gavin Newsom has accelerated California's push for greater renewable energy production

just as President-elect Joe Biden talks about creating federal policies that would encourage such investment.

### NOT TOO CLOSE

But if ag and solar do indeed grow closer together, it might not be as close as some researchers have dreamed about.

A concept known as agrivoltaics envisions crops or live-

stock thriving in and among solar farms. It already happens elsewhere on a small scale and recently the U.S. Department of Energy set aside \$7 million to support agrivoltaic pilot projects.

But the idea hasn't caught on in the Central Valley, for a few reasons. It's hard to maintain and harvest crops growing right next

Please see **SOLAR | A2**

### PUBLIC HEALTH

## As coronavirus surges in Kern, enforcement of state orders sparse at best

BY STACEY SHEPARD  
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As Kern County heads toward another major surge of COVID-19 cases, the enforcement of state rules and guidelines, meant to protect public health and stop transmission of the virus, appears to be sparse at best locally. One Kern County supervisor went so far as to promise business owners last week the county would not enforce certain state mandates that recently took effect.

"If you're a restaurant and you want to operate inside, the county is not going to make you not do that," said 3rd District Supervisor Mike Maggard, addressing a group of restaurant owners who were protesting restrictions on indoor dining. Kern was moved into the state's most restrictive purple reopening tier nearly two weeks ago, which permits only outdoor dining at restaurants.

The county also won't inform the state of businesses it knows to be violating mandates and rules, Maggard said.

Local pediatrician Dr. Namisha Amin said she didn't agree with Maggard's statements and hoped leaders and business owners understand that actions that contribute to the spread of the virus have a wider impact than some might realize.

"I just hope our community will do what needs to be done in order to get

Please see **VIRUS | A3**

### COVID-19 PANDEMIC

With no action by Washington, states race to offer COVID-19 aid

NATION & WORLD | B1

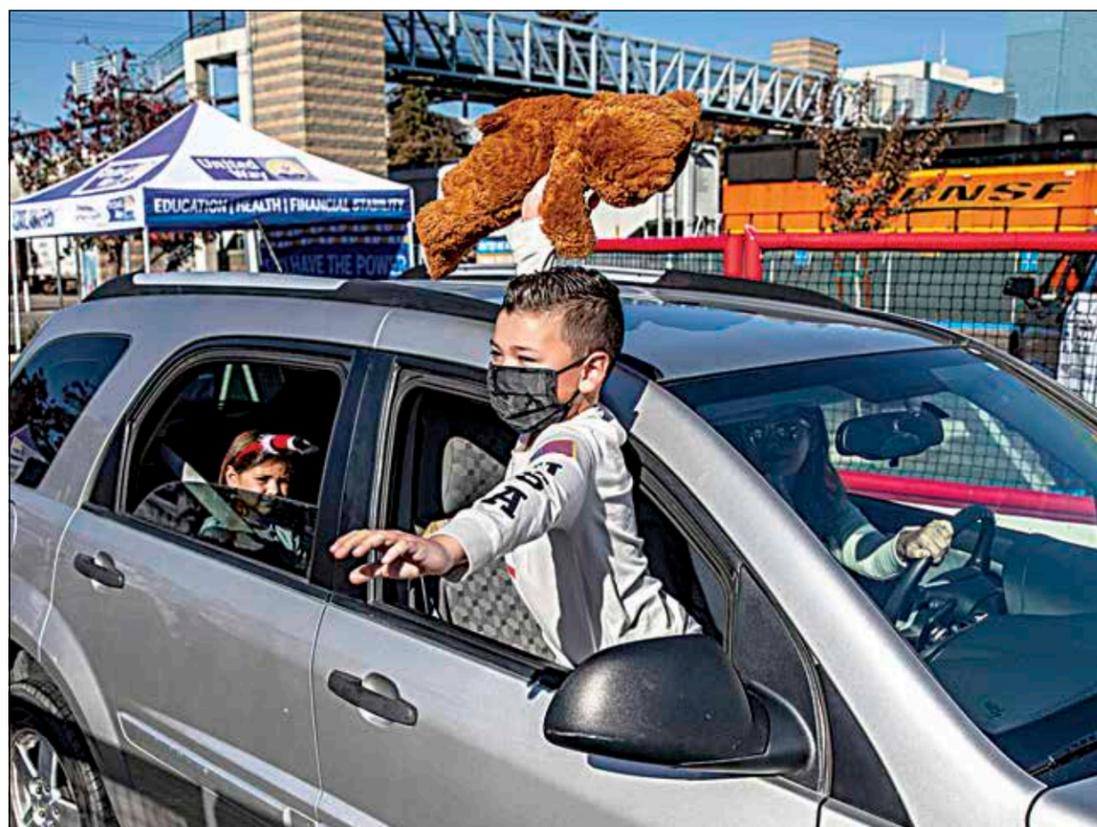
### DINING OUT

California Fish Grill quite a catch for Bakersfield, Pete Tittl writes

EYE STREET | E1

## TEDDY BEAR TOSS RETOOLED

Condors, United Way host event in drive-thru form



NICK ELLIS / FOR THE CALIFORNIAN

Ten-year-old Oliver Fahsbender winds up to toss a teddy bear during the Condors' 22nd annual Teddy Bear Toss Saturday morning at Mechanics Bank Arena. See more photos online at [Bakersfield.com](http://Bakersfield.com).

BY CLAY CUNNINGHAM  
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Trying to keep a long-standing family tradition alive any way they could, Dave and LeAnn Banducci were happy to linger around the Mechanics Bank Arena parking lot Saturday morning.

A frequent presence at local hockey games over the years, one contest that has always been circled on the Banduccis' calendar is the Bakersfield Condors' annual Teddy Bear Toss, where stuffed bears and numerous other gifts are tossed on

the ice after the Condors score their first goal and given to United Way of Kern County.

For the past five years, Dave and LeAnn have brought their grandson Erik Sandlin, now 10 years old, to the Teddy Bear Toss and have enjoyed watching him take part in the festivities. They won't get such an opportunity in 2020, as continued issues with COVID-19 have delayed the start of the Condors' season until at least Feb. 5.

"We love coming to the games and we really love the Teddy Bear Toss," Dave said. "It's something we love

doing together and it's hard not (getting to)."

While going to games remains out of the question, the team and United Way were able to bring the annual Teddy Bear Toss to the community in a highly modified form.

Now in its 22nd year, the event was held in the parking lot of Mechanics Bank Arena from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday. Conducted in a drive-thru format, passengers could drop off donations from their cars, making the traditional toss into bins spread

Please see **TOSS | A2**



ROBERT PRICE / FOR THE CALIFORNIAN

Cassie Bittle, co-owner of KC Steakhouse, sets up Christmas decorations at her restaurant.

### VIEWPOINT

## KC Steakhouse's resilient Cassie Bittle preaches survival, practices serenity



ROBERT PRICE  
FOR THE CALIFORNIAN

Cassie Bittle was keeping it together pretty well until she saw the tree.

She'd just spotted a disheveled man walking down the street carrying one of the small potted palms that had recently disappeared from the makeshift patio behind her restaurant.

The tree appeared to be dead, so it wasn't like she was going to restore it to its rightful place behind KC Steakhouse, the Bakersfield institution she and her mother, Missy Pelton

— who was the restaurant's bookkeeper for years — purchased in 2012.

No, it was simply this: Seemingly everyone and everything, from state leaders to malevolent, microscopic life forms, had been challenging her ability to prosper, even survive. And now, as if all that weren't enough, thieves were crawling out of the asphalt, taking her stuff from the restaurant's back parking lot,

Please see **PRICE | A3**



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### OUTSIDE TODAY

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PRICE: \$2

**LOCAL**

**PRICE**

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where she'd erected a canopy for outdoor dining.

The COVID-19 pandemic had driven her successful restaurant, originally founded in 1939 and situated at its present F Street location since 1967, to the brink, and now this insult.

"I'm driving on the Garces Circle and I look over and there is this guy carrying my potted plant," she said. "I wanted to scream so bad. I had to do a few loops on the Circle to calm down. I made the sound decision that it's not worth it to confront the guy — just keep going. It's already dead, just leave it be."

She'd already had three water fountains snatched from her patio and a metal loveseat that had been gifted to them, as well as garlands of flowers and a large U.S. flag, so this was the last straw. Biddle hired security to watch the back lot where she'd erected the canopy. Good thing, it turns out.

"My security guard tells me about people that are still driving by" late at night, she said. "They scope out the place quite a bit. When we had all of the waterfalls stolen — I think it was someone that saw us on the news and saw what we had out here and waited for the right moment to come get it — things weren't as protected back there. Now everything's protected."

Did it ever occur to her that all this hassle might not be worth it? Not a chance.



ROBERT PRICE / FOR THE CALIFORNIAN

**The outdoor dining area at KC Steakhouse.**

"Cassie is resilient," said Ward 2 Bakersfield City Councilman Andrae Gonzales. "Like all of us, she's had her share of challenges come her way, but she finds solutions. Others may have ideas sometimes but she's the one who takes the steps to make it happen."

Such as chatting up local elected officials about possible adjustments to the formula upon which the city bases its parking space quotas.

Such as showing up at a Kern County Board of Supervisors meeting in the early days of the pandemic-driven shutdown with computer screenshots of an innovation out of Florida: Outdoor dining where it hadn't been permitted or even seemingly feasible before.

"I keep trying to keep everybody motivated," she said. "I was so worried when this first hit that everybody would lose

their drive to keep going. I knew it was going to be a long road of twists and turns, so if I could be loud and proud of the fact that, yes, we're all suffering but that doesn't mean that we quit."

She has had servers' interests at heart every bit as much as business owners'.

"A lot of the restaurants here didn't want to do outdoor dining in the beginning," she said. "I said, 'No, you guys have to get that up and going any way that you can to make money for your employees.'"

In Bittle's case, it helped to have good karma in the bank. She and her mother might have been in more dire straits without some of the faithful customers who've helped out, loaning them the canopy that makes KC's outdoor dining arrangement possible and the huge potted trees that help patrons forget they're actually sitting in a parking lot.

Yes, it could be worse. Bittle and her mother could be oblivious to the lessons of this purple-tier shutdown. They are not.

The steps they take to make outdoor dining more pleasurable during the cold and potentially wet months to come — months that for many restaurants are make-or-break, even in the best of times — will be instructive as they weigh their options in the post-COVID world.

The staff they've trained to fill vacancies left by ex-employees — former workers who realized they could make more money living on the state's COVID-19 dole than they could working — might be valuable team members going forward.

"We've got three little 16-year-olds that

are working for us now," said Bittle, who started at KC Steakhouse herself when she was just a 15-year-old Ridgeview High School and 4-H member. "And they are the best employees, oh, my gosh. They're not ruined to the world. They still like people. They think it's fun to wash dishes. And they smile when people come in. I'm like, 'Why didn't we do this before?' It's kind of fun to see."

Fun to see: That describes Bittle's approach to overall survival, too. It's one others would be well served to emulate, because she seems to have their best interests at heart, too.

"We've had a lot of those roller coaster loops, but I think everybody has held on pretty tight," she said. "We've only lost a few here in Kern County and I want to keep that going because the camaraderie that we have among (those in) the restaurant industry here in Bakersfield is huge. We really feed off of one another. So when Mossman's is doing good and Rosemary's (Creamery) is doing good and Slice of Italy is doing good, I know I'm doing good. We need to keep these businesses alive, or people won't have a reason to come downtown."

Bittle seems determined to make that happen, too, even if it takes a few extra serenity-restoring laps around the Garces Circle now and then.

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**VIRUS**

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our numbers back down," said Amin, who is especially concerned about the impact of the pandemic on children who can't attend school. "Tens of thousands of children here have yet to see their classrooms and our behavior now is what will determine their educational outcome for the rest of the academic year."

In a Facebook video last week, one of many she's done offering advice and scientific information on the pandemic, she said: "We're losing more Americans at a rate of 1,100 to 1,300 a day (to COVID-19). So when we talk about how we love this country so much, what I don't understand is why we are not all trying to take care of our fellow countrymen, because we will all have to do that if we want to change the trajectory of this pandemic."

Their different views raise the question of how to balance competing approaches to the pandemic amid a second spike in cases in Kern. For months now, some businesses and restaurants in Kern have continued to operate in the open in violation of the state's orders without repercussion. But it was one thing for that to happen when cases had fallen to a low point in recent months and another as cases now climb dramatically.

New cases of the virus in Kern are averaging around 300 a day in the past week and are only expected to increase more. Hospitalizations have increased 127 percent in the past two weeks, from 63 COVID-19 patients to 143, according to the most recent state and county data.

According to a California Department of Public Health model that forecasts the disease's trajectory by county, cases in Kern are increasing at a rate where local hospital capacity will be overwhelmed in four weeks, on Dec. 25, with more than 300 hospitalized COVID-19 patients. More than 75 county residents are expected to die between now and Christmas.

With that in mind, is it right for the government to tell people what they can and can't do? Should our public health institutions and local law enforcement play an active role in trying to stop the spread of the disease? Do Americans have a duty to protect each other by voluntarily restricting their own activities? Is it more important to help businesses or get kids back to school?

Larger institutions are wrestling with the same questions, as well. Just as the U.S. Supreme Court ruled last week in favor of religious groups challenging pandemic restrictions issued by the state of New York, Pope Francis penned a column in the opinion section of The New York Times last week chiding those who place personal freedoms above the well-being of others.

"With some exceptions,

governments have made great efforts to put the well-being of their people first, acting decisively to protect health and to save lives ...," the pope wrote. "Yet some groups protested, refusing to keep their distance, marching against travel restrictions — as if measures that governments must impose for the good of their people constitute some kind of political assault on autonomy or personal freedom! Looking to the common good is much more than the sum of what is good for individuals. It means having a regard for all citizens and seeking to respond effectively to the needs of the least fortunate."

On Wednesday, the day after the protests by restaurant owners, Maggard elaborated on his comments about state restrictions, saying he felt that individuals have to make decisions for themselves.

"Can the governor tell you you can't worship, can the governor tell you to make a decision that will bankrupt your business and can the governor tell you you can't meet in your home with your family?" he asked. "I think individuals need to make their own decision. I'm being prudent in my life but I'm not the governor's police force and I'm not going to act as the police force."

His opinion resonates with many. Sheriff Donny Youngblood had said early on he would not enforce regulations limiting church services or requiring them to take place outdoors, and Youngblood recently said deputies would not respond to complaints of groups of people gathering or violating a statewide curfew. Across the state, many sheriffs have made similar announcements.

Maggard said it was local officials' responsibility only to remind people what the edicts are.

"Frankly, after that, the response is up to the individual and the business owner," Maggard said. He also noted that the Board of Supervisors had gone to great lengths to ensure hospital capacity is available, authorizing \$12 million to pay for extra staffing if needed.

But Amin noted in the video posted on her Facebook page that relying on hospitals and medical workers is a false sense of security because they are likely to become overwhelmed in the face of unabated growth in cases. Speaking of the many advancements that have been made to treat coronavirus patients and have effectively brought down mortality rates, she said: "But we have to remember our mortality rate is only as good as our access to a well functioning and non-overwhelmed health care system. So if we start pushing the limits, all these wonderful treatments become completely irrelevant if we can't access them. That's why these actions are so important right now."

As recently as August, she noted, local hospitals

**Kern health officials report 696 new coronavirus cases**

THE BAKERSFIELD CALIFORNIAN

Kern County Public Health Services reported 696 new cases of coronavirus Saturday, and no new deaths.



Now Kern's total confirmed cases stands at 41,328 since the pandemic began. There have been 448 deaths.

Public Health reports that 18,365 people have recovered from their illness, and 11,788 are presumed to have recovered.

This is the age breakdown of the positive cases: 4,907 people up to age 17; 25,472 people ages 18 to 49; 7,402 people ages 50 to 64; 3,539 people ages 65 and older.

The state reports that 143 people are hospitalized with COVID-19 in Kern, and 32 of those are in intensive care units. Those numbers were last updated Thursday.

The public can find more data on the Kern County Public Health COVID-19 dashboard at [https://kernpublichealth.com/covid-19\\_dashboard/](https://kernpublichealth.com/covid-19_dashboard/).

had trouble staffing hospital beds. And in some places in the United States right now, she said, nurses who are COVID-19 positive but asymptomatic are being asked to work with COVID-19 patients because health care systems have been so overwhelmed.

Kern County Public Health Services Director Matt Constantine acknowledged that the county's understanding of its own role in the pandemic has "evolved over time."

"As we understand what the state can do and what we can do, we've found some approaches were more productive than others," Constantine said.

Early on the county set up a call center to field questions about what is and isn't permitted under the state's orders. A good deal of time has been spent working with businesses to understand what restrictions apply and what is considered essential. His office has worked with schools and businesses and even the county's election department to advise on proper procedures to prevent the virus from spreading.

But the public health department is not actively checking if businesses or other groups and establishments are complying, nor is it investigating when it receives a complaint, he said.

And a map on the department's website where the public could report businesses that weren't complying with state orders has been taken down.

The county previously forwarded a list of those businesses for which it had received complaints onto the state, which does deploy enforcement strike teams throughout the state, but the county is no longer forwarding that list, Constantine said. Communication with the state has been challenging throughout the pandemic, he said.

The protocol in response to complaints from the public now is simply to send an initial letter to the business making it aware of current restrictions.

Constantine further noted that his office does not have the authority to cite or fine people or businesses; only law enforcement can.

But other counties are enforcing state orders, particularly on businesses that refuse to adhere to state guidelines on COVID-19.

San Diego County leaders recently announced they would begin to fine businesses violating orders. Los Angeles County is doing the same. Even the small community of Firebaugh, in Fresno County, is using code enforcement

officers to check whether restaurants are complying with state regulations, according to a recent report on Valley Public Radio, KVPR.

Joe Alindajao, a city councilman and mayor pro tem in Delano, said he had

proposed a mask mandate early on in the pandemic, an experience he felt highlighted the problem with enforcement. The proposal received pushback from other council members and city staff, he said, and ultimately failed to pass.

City staff and the police department were concerned about fining people and businesses that were already struggling financially and were also concerned about the confrontations that could result from enforcing a mask mandate.

He's now convinced the best approach is for the city to partner with churches and community groups to do education and outreach.

"It's a sensitive issue. It's not as clear as using a seat belt or not using a cell phone when driving. We can see the clear implications of practicing that kind of behavior," he said.

**The Bakersfield Californian**

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**TODAY IN HISTORY**

- 1864:** A Colorado militia killed at least 150 peaceful Cheyenne Indians in the Sand Creek Massacre.
- 1910:** British explorer Robert F. Scott's ship Terra Nova set sail from New Zealand, carrying Scott's expedition on its ultimately futile — as well as fatal — race to reach the South Pole first.
- 1924:** Italian composer Giacomo Puccini died in Brussels before he could complete his opera "Turandot." (It was finished by Franco Alfano.)
- 1929:** Navy Lt. Cmdr. Richard E. Byrd, pilot Bernt Balchen, radio operator Harold G. Gatty and photographer Ashley McKinney made the first airplane flight over the South Pole.
- 1952:** President-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower secretly left on a trip to Korea, keeping his campaign promise to assess the ongoing conflict firsthand.
- 1961:** Enos the chimp was launched from Cape Canaveral aboard the Mercury-Atlas 5 spacecraft, which orbited Earth twice before returning.
- 1963:** President Lyndon B. Johnson named a commission headed by Earl Warren to investigate the assassination of John F. Kennedy.
- 1981:** Film star Natalie Wood drowned in a boating accident off Santa Catalina Island at age 43.
- 1987:** A Korean Air 707 jetliner en route from Abu Dhabi to Bangkok was destroyed by a bomb planted by North Korean agents with the loss of all 115 people aboard.
- 2000:** Bracing the public for more legal wrangling, Vice President Al Gore said in a series of TV interviews that he was prepared to contest the Florida presidential vote until "the middle of December."
- 2001:** George Harrison, the "quiet Beatle," died in Los Angeles following a battle with cancer; he was 58.
- 2008:** Indian commandos killed the last remaining gunmen holed up at a luxury Mumbai hotel, ending a 60-hour rampage through India's financial capital by suspected Pakistani-based militants that killed 166 people.
- 2009:** A gunman shot and killed four Lakewood, Wash., police officers at a coffee shop (suspect Maurice Clemmons was shot to death by a Seattle police officer two days later). Iran approved plans to build 10 industrial scale uranium enrichment facilities in defiance of U.N. demands it halt enrichment.

— The Associated Press

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**Saturday's Powerball** 8 12 18 44 51 18  
Next jackpot: \$216 million

**Friday's Mega Millions** 4 10 27 35 58 10  
Next jackpot: \$229 million

**Saturday's SuperLotto** 2 14 26 32 38 5  
Next jackpot: \$11 million

**Daily 3** MIDDAY: 4 8 7 EVENING: 0 2 9

**Daily 4:** 5 6 1 9 **Fantasy 5:** 3 10 17 31 35

**Daily Derby** HORSES: 9 6 5 RACE TIME: 1:45.58