

\$3.66 DESIGNATED AREAS HIGHER © 2026

## State is probing pay for petition signers

Video allegedly shows people in S.F. getting \$5, being told to use valid voters' data.

By CIERRA MORGAN

A video circulating online appears to show signature collectors paying people to sign initiative petitions under other people's names, according to officials, and now the state has opened an investigation.

The video, filmed by self-described street videographer JJ Smith, shows a long queue leading to a table set up at 6th and Mission streets in San Francisco. A man in line says they are being offered \$5 to sign petitions. At the table, where there are lists with the information of apparent registered voters, a woman confirmed the payment and — using a highlighter — instructs a person on the name and address that she is supposed to use. "I get \$5 too?" the person filming asks.

"Yeah," says the woman. "And what is it?" "Just sign it," she says.

Petitions connected to at least three ballot campaigns — including the billionaire-backed effort to thwart California's proposed billionaire tax — appear in the video.

"I approached some people and asked them what they were there for," Smith told The Times. "They told me they didn't know what they were signing for, that they just wanted the \$5."

Smith, whose real name is Omar Ward, has been known for posting images on social media of people suffering from addiction on San Francisco's streets.

He said he watched the signature-collection scene for hours and estimated that a few hundred people cycled through the line over roughly two hours.

Those running the table did not ask for anyone's identification and gave no explanation of what actually was being signed, he said.

The video showed voter data from San Luis Obispo County that was both visible and, as details were spoken aloud, audible.

[See **Petition**, A6]



GENARO MOLINA Los Angeles Times



ATTA KENARE AFP/Getty Images

**IVAN DORADO**, top, pumps \$60 in gas in Lincoln Heights. Above, Iranians hold photos of former and current supreme leaders during military funerals in Tehran.

## In the dark on Iran's current nuclear stance

### New leader stays silent on atomic weapons

By MICHAEL WILNER

WASHINGTON — Days after he was named Iran's next supreme leader, and over a week since U.S. and Israeli bombing wiped out much of his family, Mojtaba Khamenei issued his first statement on Thursday demanding vengeance against the alliance over the war it unleashed.

He called on Iranian forces to continue thwarting vital shipping traffic through the Strait of Hormuz. He vowed to open new fronts against the United States and Israel. And he warned that Persian Gulf states hosting U.S. bases would remain targets of Iranian attack.

Yet, what concerned the White House most was what the new supreme leader didn't say.

Khamenei made no mention of a strategic endeavor that had brought the Islamic Republic to war: its nuclear program, suspected for decades of harboring military dimensions.

The omission was not lost on officials in the Trump administration, who told The Times they are largely in the dark over the new supreme leader's stance on whether Iran should break out to build a nuclear weapon.

Khamenei's deep alliance with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which has advocated for weaponization in the past, has raised concern that the new leader will depart from his father's longstanding position against building a bomb.

U.S. intelligence assessments long held that the late ayatollah, Ali Khamenei, had adopted a strategy of remaining at the threshold of developing a nuclear weapon while

**NO RETREAT:** Ayatollah vows revenge and to keep strait closed. **WORLD**, A2

## How war and gas prices are jolting state's economy

Pain at the pump hurts drivers and industries, but Iran conflict could benefit defense firms.

By LAURENCE DARMIENTO

With crude oil topping \$100 a barrel, and the average price of gas in the state approaching \$5.50 a gallon, every touch of the nozzle is painful for California drivers.

Now, with the Iran war nearing its third week, the soaring costs of energy are rippling through the world's fourth-largest economy.

While economists say it's too early to gauge the long-term impacts on the state, one thing is clear:

The higher cost to fill gas tanks is eating into Californians' disposable incomes — what's spent to buy food and other necessities, or to go out and have fun — while reducing the income of businesses, also facing higher fuel costs.

"Inflation and affordability have been a big concern for the American public, and the longer this goes on, the greater risk there is of increasing overall inflation," said Trevor Higgins, senior vice president for energy and the environment at the Center for American Progress. The group released a report this week documenting the inflationary impacts of the war and past conflicts.

The price of a gallon of gas hit \$5.37 on Thursday, the highest in the nation and up 82 cents from a month ago, according to AAA.

Before the start of the

war, the California economy seemed poised for strong growth despite a lagging jobs market that has seen multiple employers — including several major tech companies such as Google, Block and Autodesk — slash payrolls by the thousands.

The state's economy grew at a robust 3.8% annualized rate in the fourth quarter, driven by artificial intelligence investment, the burgeoning aerospace industry and other high-productivity sectors, according to the UCLA Anderson Forecast released early this month.

The report predicted a possible pickup in employment this year, but any prolonged conflict in the Middle East means all bets are off.

The \$4.1-trillion state economy is highly diverse, with large logistics, manufacturing and agriculture industries, just to name a few sectors having to absorb higher fuel costs — though defense contractors could well benefit from the war.

Just as the state's more than 25 million registered drivers are experiencing pain at the pump, the rising cost of diesel fuel is hitting Southern California's large logistics industry, including truckers reliant on diesel fuel.

The average price of a gallon of diesel was up to \$6.21 on Thursday, up \$1.17 from a month earlier.

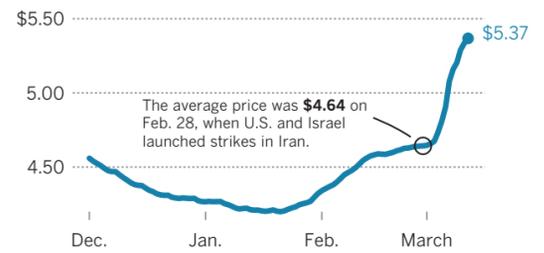
The twin ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach are the epicenter of the region's logistics industry, supporting more than 200,000 jobs and contributing \$28 billion to the regional economy in 2022. Some 9,000 truckers visit the ports at least once

[See **Economy**, A11]

### Gas prices are up in California

The average price for regular gasoline is up 16% since the start of the war.

Daily average price per gallon



AAA

VANESSA MARTÍNEZ Los Angeles Times

## Priciest real estate is now in Southland

By TERRY CASTLEMAN

It's hundreds of miles from the AI boom and tech billionaire class of Silicon Valley.

It maintains an image, at least in some minds, as a beachside mecca for old money, big yachts and conspicuous consumption.

And now, a new Times analysis of the highest home values in California shows Newport Beach perched at the top. Among California's most upscale neighborhoods, a subtle reshuffling has taken place in recent

decades, with the highest home values migrating from Northern California to Southern California.

A Times analysis for 2026 shows three of the top 10 ZIP Codes for highest home value were in Newport Beach. Only one other community showed up twice on the list: Los Altos in Silicon Valley.

Property values are just one way of assessing wealth and do not take into account such markers as income and tax base. But they do offer a window into the demographic patterns of the rich.

In 2001, seven of the 10 ZIP [See **Homes**, A6]



ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

**SEVEN OF** the state's 10 richest ZIP Codes are in Southern California, and three are in Newport Beach.

### Armed driver rams synagogue

Man fatally shot after attack on Temple Israel in Michigan. No teachers or children are injured. **NATION**, A7

### Produce tainted by pesticide

Nearly 40% of crops tested have residues that contain "forever" chemicals, a study says. **CALIFORNIA**, B1

### State to review Paramount deal

California Atty. Gen. Rob Bonta pledges to bring regulatory scrutiny to Warner Bros. merger. **BUSINESS**, A10

### 'Sinners' may be Oscar winner

The film, hailed as a symbol of Black artistic excellence, has fresh momentum. **ENTERTAINMENT**, E1

### Weather Record heat.

L.A. Basin: 92/60. **B6**

### Markets ..... A11

Opinion Voices .... A13

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## Star chef resigns from Noma

René Redzepi leaves after abuse allegations as \$1,500-per-person pop-up opens in L.A.

By STEPHANIE BREIJO

On the day that his high-profile Los Angeles pop-up launched, celebrity chef René Redzepi announced he would "step away" from Noma, his pioneering Copenhagen restaurant, and has resigned from MAD, the community-building non-

profit he founded.

The chef's announcement follows dozens of recently resurfaced abuse allegations as well as protests this week outside the gate of Noma's L.A. pop-up in Silver Lake.

The news came after several dizzying days of developments related to the \$1,500-a-seat pop-up that Redzepi announced last summer, and was sparked after a Saturday report in the New York Times detailing past allegations of abuse in the restaurant's kitchen and fermentation

lab in Denmark.

The pop-up opened Wednesday afternoon for its first guests, with a small gathering of protesters outside calling for more accountability and higher wages for restaurant workers.

Anonymously submitted allegations of physical and verbal abuse began appearing on Instagram last month when a former Noma staff member, Jason Ignacio White, used his own account to platform and post them. On Saturday, the report by [See **Noma**, A8]

## Cuba is 'ready' for talks with U.S.

Envoy's remarks come as tensions escalate and oil blockade adds to economic pressure.

By ANA CEBALLOS

WASHINGTON — Cuba's top diplomat in Washington says Havana is prepared to enter diplomatic talks with the United States, reiterating the country's willingness to engage even as tensions escalate with President Trump as-

serting that the island nation's government could soon collapse.

"We are ready to engage with the U.S. on the issues that are important for the bilateral relations, and to talk about those in which we have differences," Ambassador Lianys Torres Rivera, who leads Cuba's mission in Washington, told The Times on Wednesday.

Any dialogue would need to respect Cuba's sovereignty and its "right to self-determination," the ambassador said.

"We are sure that it is pos-

sible to find a solution," she said.

Her comments in a wide-ranging interview come at a particularly volatile moment for Cuba, which is under mounting economic pressure after the Trump administration imposed an oil blockade that has choked off the island's energy supplies.

The measures have deepened a humanitarian crisis and prompted Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel to call for an "urgent" overhaul of the country's economic [See **Cuba**, A4]