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By **Soumya Karlamangla**  
 California Today, Writer



Barricades blocking off a crumbling section of West Cliff Drive in Santa Cruz in January. *Jessica Christian/San Francisco Chronicle via Associated Press*

SANTA CRUZ — West Cliff Drive is not a typical neighborhood thoroughfare.

High above the glittering blue waters of Monterey Bay, where surfers edge and seals hob in the waves, the small two-lane road hugs the surprisingly close edge of the cliffs. On a recent morning, a couple rode a two-seater bicycle along the roadway, soaking in the expansive views of the Pacific Ocean. A group wearing puffer jackets teetered on an impressive outcropping 40 feet above the water to snap a photo.

This 2.7-mile promenade attracts thousands of joggers, sightseers, cyclists and surfers each day. For many who live in Santa Cruz, the corridor feels like an essential part of the identity of the funky beach city, about 75 miles south of San Francisco and home to 62,000 people.

"It's so much more than a road," said Hilary Bryant, a former mayor of Santa Cruz. "Tourists come here and they go to West Cliff Drive — it's like our front yard."

But the recent high-profile winter storms in California [hit the region](#) particularly hard, splitting [the Capitola Wharf in half](#) and prompting mudslides that shut down two freeways. Along West Cliff Drive, 20-foot-tall waves dragged chunks of the roadway into the sea, closing parts of the road for at least another six months.

The extensive destruction has forced the city to think about how to adapt to an increasingly eroding coastline as sea levels rise and storms become more violent — something many Santa Cruz residents had seen as hypothetical or as an issue to be dealt with in the distant future.

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"This was sort of a wake-up call," said Gary Griggs, a professor of earth sciences who has taught at the University of California, Santa Cruz, since the 1960s. "I've never seen this much damage this quickly in my 55 years here. So it's time to step back and say, 'This is what's coming.'"

A majority of the state's coast is lined by cliffs — and most of them are eroding. According to a study published in September, an average of two inches of California's coast dribbles into the sea every year, though in [some spots](#), like Eureka, it can be 10 times that amount.

This trend will only increase as oceans rise and storms become more powerful this century. That means many eyes are on Santa Cruz, as it decides how to tackle the problem of West Cliff Drive.

There aren't any easy solutions. Among the possibilities: further bolster the cliffside with seawalls or boulders to preserve the two-lane road; narrow it to one lane to make room for the retreating coastline; or close it to cars altogether.

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No decisions, or even proposals, have been made yet, but the future of West Cliff has dominated chitchat around Santa Cruz lately, said Fran Grayson, who owns Steamer Lane Supply, a cafe on West Cliff Drive overlooking the water.

"People are talking about it and stressing about it," Grayson told me. That's especially true among the surfers who treasure the [breaks off West Cliff](#) that helped make Santa Cruz a worldwide surfing destination.

The damage from the recent storms to West Cliff Drive will cost \$13 million to repair, the city manager, Matt Huffaker, said, and without additional steps, the Santa Cruz coastline could sustain as much as \$1 billion in erosion and other climate-related damage by the end of the century. "We can't simply build back in the same way," he said.

As I walked along West Cliff Drive recently, savoring the salty air, pedestrians peered over plastic barriers to get a better look at a spot where the asphalt had crumbled into the sea.

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Gretchen Bach, who lives on a stretch of West Cliff that was among the hardest hit by the storms, said the impacts had not been all bad. True, closing one lane of the road has meant fewer parking options for her and her neighbors, but also less car traffic and more breathing room for people on foot.

"People stop and talk to each other, there's just more space — it's like our community meeting place," Bach, who works as a real estate agent, told me. "I'd trade that for parking any day."

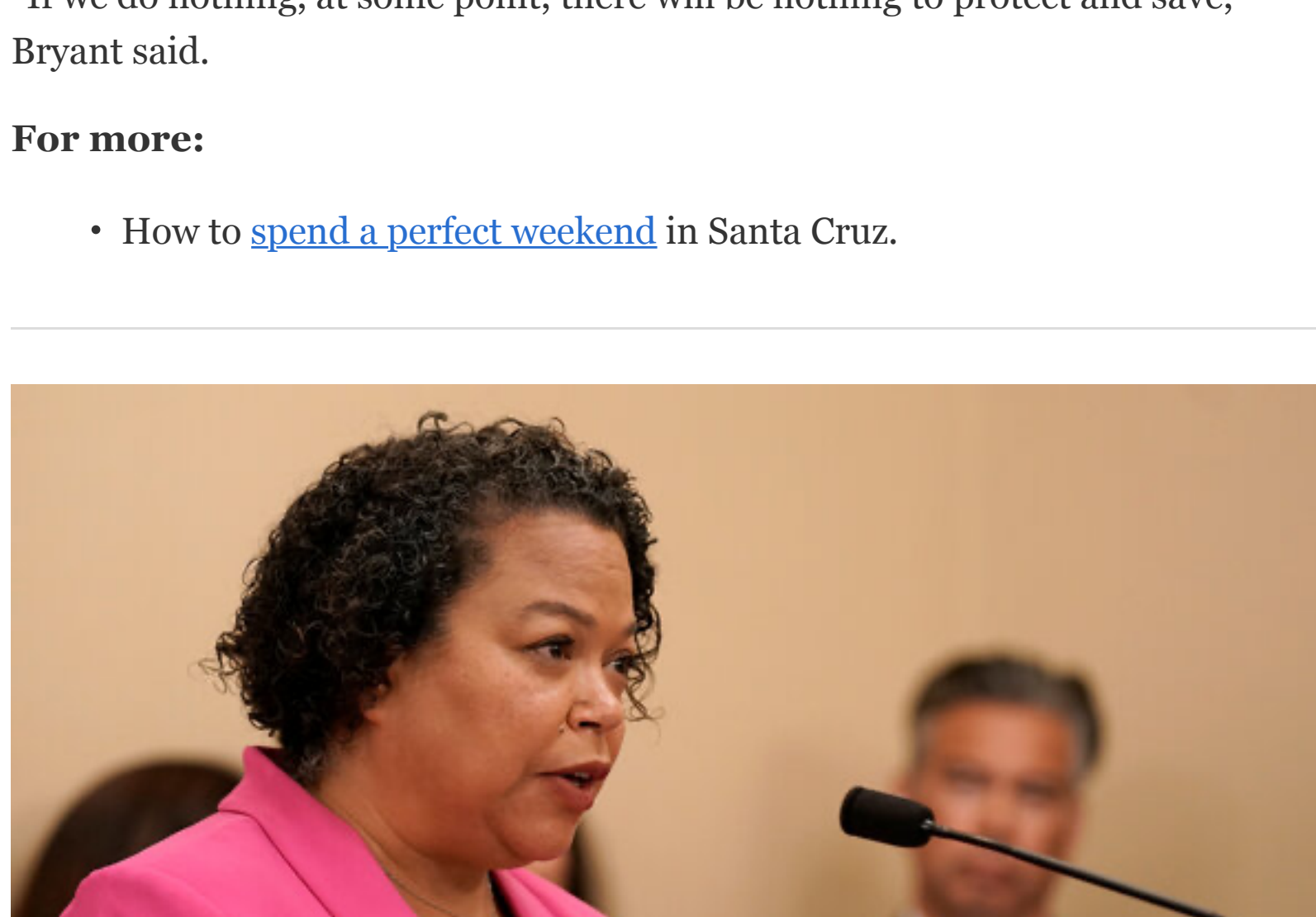
Debates similar to the one around West Cliff Drive are likely to play out across California in the coming decades as the effects of climate change take their toll. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, some [200,000 Californians](#) and almost \$17 billion in residential and commercial buildings are at risk from coastal flooding alone. Without intervention, many highways, airports and recreational beaches will be [damaged or destroyed](#).

In Santa Cruz, the reality of coastal erosion and climate change seemed to have sunk in among residents who treasure West Cliff Drive.

"If we do nothing, at some point, there will be nothing to protect and save," Bryant said.

**For more:**

- How to [spend a perfect weekend](#) in Santa Cruz.



Mia Bonta during a news conference in Sacramento last year. *Rich Pedronelli/Associated Press*

## The rest of the news

- **The Bontas:** Assemblywoman Mia Bonta, the wife of the California attorney general, Rob Bonta, has been tapped to [lead a budget committee](#) that oversees his agency's spending, a decision that some political experts say is ethically questionable, KCRA reports.
- **Education:** How educators [secretly remove](#) students with disabilities from school.
- **Albert Okura:** He built a California fast-food chain, opened a McDonald's museum and restored a historic town on Route 66. [Okura died last month at age 71](#).

### SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

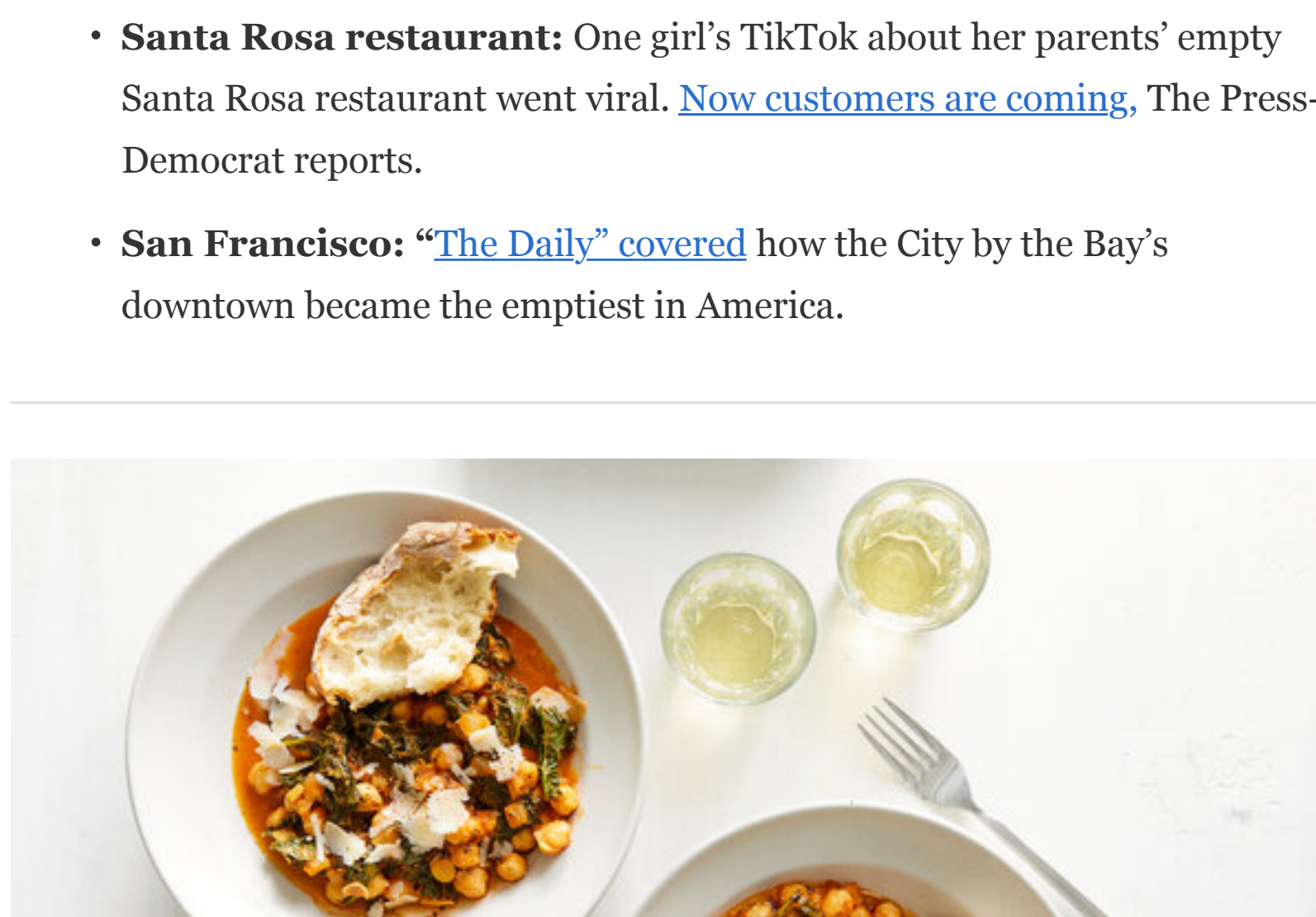
- **Strike-authorization vote:** Members of the union that represents most nonteaching employees in Los Angeles schools, including bus drivers and cafeteria workers, [overwhelmingly voted to authorize a strike](#), The Los Angeles Times reports.
- **Clergy sex abuse:** The Roman Catholic Diocese of San Diego [may declare bankruptcy](#) in the coming months because of legal costs regarding some 400 lawsuits that accused priests and others of sexually abusing children, The Associated Press reports.

### CENTRAL CALIFORNIA

- **Highway 1 reopening:** Weeks after storms closed a stretch of Highway 1 south of Big Sur, Caltrans [reopened much of the road to traffic](#) over the weekend. But portions of the highway will remain closed, The Los Angeles Times reports.

### NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

- **Cal Poly Humboldt:** Because of a severe housing shortage, hundreds of Cal Poly Humboldt students will [live in hotels this fall](#), Jefferson Public Radio reports.
- **Santa Rosa restaurant:** One girl's TikTok about her parents' empty Santa Rosa restaurant went viral. [Now customers are coming](#), The Press-Democrat reports.
- **San Francisco:** ["The Daily" covered](#) how the City by the Bay's downtown became the emptiest in America.



Ryan Liebe for The New York Times.

## What we're eating

[Beans and greens alla vodka](#).

## Where we're traveling

Today's tip comes from Edward Lebowitz:

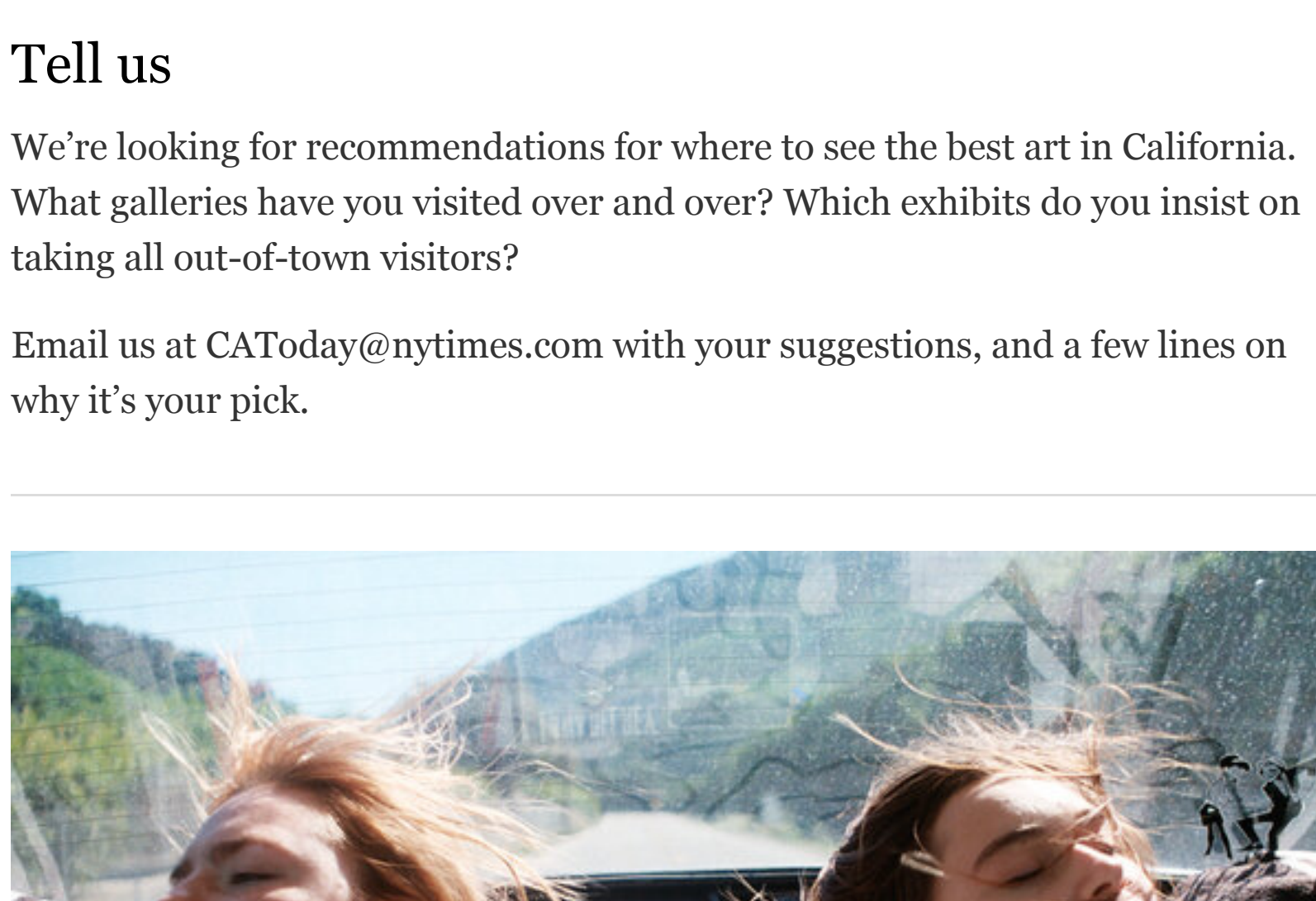
"For a challenging but beautiful walk in San Francisco, I love the stairways that lead to [Marshall's Beach](#), which you access from the Presidio. The bird's-eye views of the ocean and Golden Gate from above are equaled only by the views and sounds of the waves, giant cargo ships and shore birds you get when you arrive at sea level. Once I was lucky enough to arrive at low tide and walked east to directly underneath the Golden Gate Bridge, which was thrilling."

**Tell us about your favorite places to visit in California.** Email your suggestions to [CAToday@nytimes.com](mailto:CAToday@nytimes.com). We'll be sharing more in upcoming editions of the newsletter.

## Tell us

We're looking for recommendations for where to see the best art in California. What galleries have you visited over and over? Which exhibits do you insist on taking all out-of-town visitors?

Email us at [CAToday@nytimes.com](mailto:CAToday@nytimes.com) with your suggestions, and a few lines on why it's your pick.



Adali Schell for The New York Times

## And before you go, some good news

For many young people, their first car grants them a freedom to explore their city on an intimate level, with their windows down and music blasting — and away from the prying eyes of parents.

The photographer Adali Schell, 21, grew up in Los Angeles and spent last summer documenting the members of his creative community in their cars.

Finding a place to belong "feels so scarce" in Los Angeles, Adali said. But in the confines of an old Mercedes-Benz (now powered by vegetable oil), a former taxi cab, a beat-up Volvo and a "mom" car, this group of artists and students found "a stronger sense of self and sense of security."

Kerry Parker, 15, and Pilot Lee, 19, told The New York Times that they can spend hours driving around the city with no destination in mind, blasting Thievery Corporation, Radiohead and Aphex Twin and grooving on the same wavelength.

"It doesn't matter where you are," Kerry said. "It's just the company."

See more from [Adali's stunning photo essay](#).

**Thanks for reading. I'll be back tomorrow. — Soumya**

*P.S. Here's [today's Mini Crossword](#).*

*Briana Scalia and Maia Coleman contributed to California Today. You can reach the team at [CAToday@nytimes.com](mailto:CAToday@nytimes.com).*

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