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CALIFORNIA AQUEDUCT

“Only one thing can truly help in our efforts to save future lives, and that is educating the public on the dangers that lurk in the water.”

— San Bernardino County Sheriff’s Capt. Sarkis Ohannessian



SARAH ALVARADO — STAFF FILE PHOTO

A San Bernardino County Sheriff’s dive team emerges from the California Aqueduct in Hesperia after searching for 2-year-old Noah Abbot on March 3, 2017. The boy’s body was recovered nearly two weeks later. The boy’s mother, Christina Estrada, 31, and a brother, Jeremiah Abbott, 3, died after Estrada’s car crashed and plunged into the aqueduct March 2, 2017. Another brother, Elijah Estrada, 10, survived.

DEADLY WATERS

DROWNINGS AT CHANNEL RENEW SAFETY CONCERNS IN SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY’S HIGH DESERT REGION

First of two parts

By Joe Nelson
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Tchaikovsky’s “Waltz of the Flowers” played on the car stereo, lulling a weary Kevin Cabrera to sleep as he drove north on Highway 395 in the pitch-black Mojave Desert near Victorville around 2:30 a.m. Feb. 20.

Then, a hard bump, a violent jolt and a loud crash. Cabrera woke up just as his 2012 Honda Civic LX careened down an embankment and plunged into the frigid water of the California Aqueduct. The windshield cracked when the car hit the water and started sinking.

Cabrera, a mechanical engineering student at Cal Poly Pomona, reacted swiftly. He unfasted his seatbelt and, to his surprise, was able to open the door rather easily. He swam to the surface, clung to a buoy line, pulled himself to the aqueduct’s concrete embankment and climbed out. Soaked, bleeding from the head and stranded in freezing temperatures that dropped to the mid-20s that night, Cabrera hiked roughly

AQUEDUCT » PAGE 13



JOE NELSON — STAFF

In February, Kevin Cabrera, 21, of Victorville fell asleep at the wheel while driving north on Highway 395 through the Mojave Desert. His car plunged into the aqueduct, but he survived.

MORE INSIDE

Dangers: City and state officials contend that human error is to blame, noting that warning signs are posted at the aqueduct. PAGE 12

Lost life: Fourteen people died in the California Aqueduct in San Bernardino County between Jan. 5, 2014, and Feb. 4, 2018. PAGE 13

FILM AND TV

Hollywood is facing a ‘space crunch’

Filmmakers are running out of places to film

By Bob Strauss
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The good news is that Hollywood has come back to Hollywood in a big way.

A combination of an improved state production tax credit program and Netflix (and other growing streaming services) making new shows on a seemingly weekly basis has brought cameras rolling like never before in the Los Angeles region.

The bad news is, the region is running out of places to shoot.

“We’re very aware of it,” Kevin James, director of the Mayor’s Office of Film and Television, said of a soundstage crunch that’s seeing facilities designed for interior filming booked for the long term. “It’s a challenge for us, but it’s a challenge we’re very happy to have. It means that filmmaking’s coming back, it’s coming back in a large and significant way.”

Well, maybe not feature film—
HOLLYWOOD » PAGE 8

INGLEWOOD

Allegations imply mayor profited from brother’s job

By Jason Henry
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Inglewood Mayor James T. Butts dodged criminal prosecution in 2013 when the Los Angeles County District Attorney’s Office declared it wasn’t illegal for him to ask companies competing for a lucrative city trash contract to hire his unemployed brother.

Even though one of those companies indeed hired Michael Butts to a \$72,000-a-year job and then was awarded the city refuse hauling contract, prosecutors said the mayor committed no criminal wrongdoing because he had not personally benefited from the arrangement.

But newly uncovered documents suggest James Butts did gain financially from his brother’s job at Consolidated Disposal Services, which was selected by the City Council even though it was not the low bidder on the contract. Bankruptcy records filed by Michael Butts revealed he paid

INGLEWOOD » PAGE 5



James Butts

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Hollywood

FROM PAGE 1

making so much as the big demand for space by longer-occupancy TV and streaming series productions that may be forcing movie makers to look elsewhere. Some network producers and streaming outfits tie up stage space when they're not shooting anything, to have it available when their shows are renewed or Netflix greenlights another new series or 10.

"There's an overwhelming amount of production going on, so the soundstages — it's been tight space," noted producer-director Grant Housley, who's planning to start a feature in the fall. "Everything's booked. Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, every single studio, tons of productions are going on. It's sort of a good problem to have because there's a lot of employment as well, but there's a limited amount of space these days."

Paul Audley, president of the region's main film office, FilmL.A., confirmed that the "crunch" has been growing. His office recently released reports that placed local soundstage occupancy rates at 92 percent and 96 percent in different periods of the past two years, up more than 20 points from the before-surge average.

"I think, to the credit of the state tax incentive program, we've seen so much television return, and then the expansion of the amount of content being produced here with companies like Netflix and Amazon and Hulu, we've pretty well filled up all the soundstages in the L.A. region," Audley said. "Over 90 percent occupancy means that there's not a lot available for folks who might be coming in to visit or for features, even, at this point. So it's created quite a crunch in the industry. They're now looking for where they can expand those resources."

Which isn't so easy because of other recent Southern California economic phenomena such as skyrock-



PHOTOS BY HANS GUTKNECHT — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Above and right: Alton Butler is the CEO of soundstage facility Line 204 in Hollywood. An increase in outlets like Netflix means there are more shows in production than ever before. However, it also means that shows are hogging soundstage space in L.A., leading to a slowdown in feature film production.

eting real estate prices and more profitable mixed-use construction.

Yet despite L.A.'s notorious overall space crunch, some steps are being taken to relieve the soundstage shortage.

Crimson Studios opened five stages in Chatsworth last year. Warner Bros. is just completing its technically versatile 36th soundstage on its venerable Burbank lot — and although the studio declined to confirm it, Variety reported two years ago that Universal City plans to build 10 new stages. Netflix likewise didn't want to discuss its extension plans, but it is believed that more stages will come online at the Bronson Studios complex the streaming behemoth recently occupied in Hollywood.

And then there's Line 204's planned 10-stage Sun Valley Studio, which this month got the legal go-ahead to break ground in September after years of court challenges from neighbors. The company's chief executive, Alton Butler, who has operated stages in Hollywood for more than a dozen years, pointed out that real estate is way too expensive around the buildings he already has

for Line 204 to expand, and that the northeast San Fernando Valley is one of the few areas within the Thirty Mile Zone (a radius beginning in Hollywood, outside of which cast and crew must be paid extra to work) with enough affordable land for such an ambitious project.

"Anybody in the studio business who says, 'I'll just build more,' well, no you won't because there's nowhere to build it," Butler said. "It's a quandary in a couple of aspects. You'd love to build more stages, but you can't afford it in this area. You can afford it once you go out of the area, but you've got to get the kind of land you need to build a studio, and then you're out of the Thirty Mile Zone. If you're a mile out of that zone, actresses, producers, crew members get per diems, they get overnight stays, and it takes the budget drastically the other way. So you've got to stay within that Thirty Mile Zone, and it's almost like looking for that needle in a haystack."

Warner Bros. — which released the first synchronized sound film, "The Jazz Singer," in 1927 and thus established the industry's need for acoustically controllable stages — is about out of

building space on its main lot in Burbank.

"It's a question of finding capacity on these lots that we have," Jeff Nagler, executive vice president, studio facilities for Warner Bros., acknowledged. "Our latest soundstage is on the main lot, and the main lot has, I think, pretty much reached capacity from a soundstage perspective. But we have our ranch studio, which is a half mile away, and we have developed plans previously to possibly put up three or four new soundstages at the ranch. So if we feel the need, we may decide to build two stages at a time or something like that. It's all going to be based on what we view as the need for Warner Bros. and for other entities."

Nagler noted that the crunch has driven other studios and outside producers to book time on Warner's stages. He expects the new one, like the 35 others, will be fully occupied when it opens in June — which is just about when production for the next network TV season gets underway.

"I'm confident that those who want a home in Los Angeles will find one, and it's because of companies like ours that continue to invest here," Nagler said. "There



"Everything's booked. Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, every single studio, tons of productions are going on. It's sort of a good problem to have because there's a lot of employment as well, but there's a limited amount of space these days."

— Grant Housley, producer and director

is some space crunch going on. But I'm generally finding people do find a home. It might not be their first choice, it might not be their optimal configuration every time, but production people are very resourceful and they find a way to get their product made."

That can require some improvisation. While new soundstages are gradually added to the local landscape, demand continues to furiously ramp up.

"We, and the city and county, have been helping to find locations where they can convert warehouses or other properties so that they can do filming," FilmL.A.'s Audley noted.

"It's much easier for television to do that because they don't need quite the same height and space that features do. So we've seen some of that, we've seen some of the big-box stores that have been closed up and are becoming permanent stages for some television shows.

"So, we're improvising. But I think everybody would like to see more consolidated facilities on one piece of property."

Line 204's Butler confirmed the last part of Audley's statement and took it further.

"The big thing over the last two years has been, well, I'll just buy a warehouse downtown, put some mounts in it and put some Insul-Quilt up, and buddy we've got us a soundstage," Butler pointed out with some mockery. "Not really; you've got a warehouse that's got some Insul-Quilt on it. A lot of people don't want that."

The city, meanwhile, is doing what it can to meet the soundstage challenge it's so happy to have.

"We know that Apple is also scouting spaces. I would expect that Amazon is, secondary to the headquarters issue, just studios," James, of the Mayor's Film and TV Office, said. "These are things that our office, in conjunction with the Mayor's Office of Economic Development, we work together with them on. So we're dealing with a number of things related to that.

"We're keeping our eye on and working together with the various council offices and other stakeholders when studios are looking to acquire space that can be converted to soundstage space or changed into soundstage space. And there are a number of sites in various parts of the city that are candidates."

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