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SPORTS, 1B



The Desert Sun

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2 Palm Springs candidates take the lead in fundraising

First to announce, Bernstein and deHarte collect cash, endorsements ahead of November council election

Paul Albani-Burgio
Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

The first two candidates to announce their plans to run in this fall's Palm Springs City Council election have also been by far the biggest fundraisers so far.

Campaign financing disclosures covering the first six months of the year, which candidates had to file last week, show District 2 candidate Jeffrey Bernstein and District 3 candidate Ron deHarte each with a commanding fundraising advantage over their competition.

Bernstein took in just short of \$75,000 while deHarte took in about \$52,000, according to the filings. Both their fundraising totals were far greater than the next highest grosser: Incumbent District 1 councilmember Grace Garner, who took in about \$30,000.

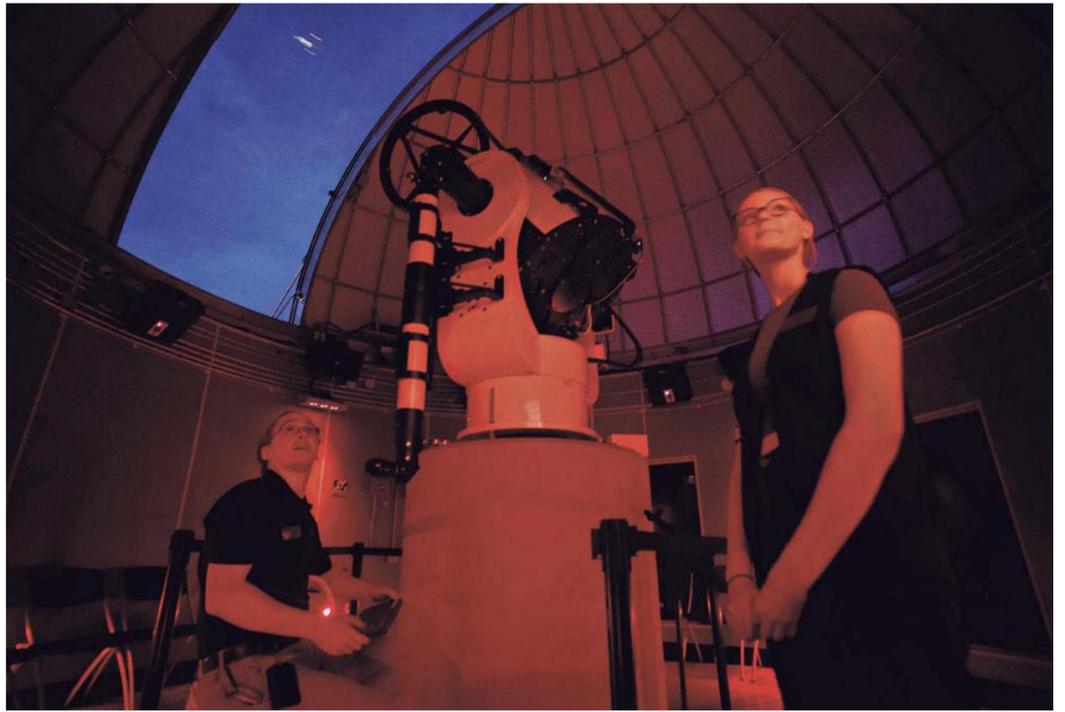
Along with the most money, all three have gotten endorsements from high-profile political and business figures, including CEOs, downtown restaurant owners and some of the current council members.

Garner's competition in District 1, TV personality Scott Nevins, donated about \$4,000 to his own campaign, which did not take in any other donations. Incumbent District 2 councilmember Dennis Woods, who has been publicly silent about his plans to run but recently picked up papers that suggest he's considering it, did not take in any donations.

Nor did another District 2 candidate, Renee Brown. However, forms she filed since then show she has taken in six donations in July, including \$4,900 each from noted Palm Springs philanthropist Harold Matzner and Gene Autry's widow, Jackie Autry. That is the most a person can donate to one candidate. In total, Brown has taken in about \$13,000 in July.

Kenneth Connors and Joy Brown Meredith, who had said they plan to run in Districts 2 and 3 respectively, did not launch campaigns until July. Three other residents who have also filed paperwork to run,

See **CITY COUNCIL**, Page 4A



Astronomer Eric McLaughlin, left, and docent Cassidy Albrinck, 16, of Joshua Tree, prepare for the stargazing event. TAYA GRAY/THE DESERT SUN

GAZING BACK MILLIONS OF YEARS

A look at the night sky from Rancho Mirage Observatory

Nicky Loomis Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun | USA TODAY NETWORK

On a recent Thursday under the nasty spell of yet another excessive heat warning, Eric McLaughlin and Lauren Zuckerberg assessed the rising night sky as we stood on the deck of the Rancho Mirage Observatory. • Tonight, our enemy was clear: clouds. Summer clouds, the kind that lingered in the night sky, blocking stars. • "We're in a holding pattern until Vega appears," McLaughlin said to Zuckerberg.

McLaughlin, Rancho Mirage's city astronomer and Zuckerberg, the Observatory program coordinator, were trying to align the telescopes off the brightest star of the season, Vega.

They had lugged the three computerized Celestron telescopes and the fourth manual Orion telescope onto the terrace and were busy in the "homing phase" of the evening, trying to find tonight's stars.

"So, I got Vega but it's barely there," McLaughlin said as he peeked through the telescope. "Let's see if Spica shows up."

They spoke to each other as though they were gossiping about guests arriving to a party one by one. In fact, there was a party coming: a big one. The duo leads the year-round free stargazing events for groups of

See **OBSERVATORY**, Page 7A

Report: Rental ban would cost La Quinta millions. Some are skeptical

Tom Coulter
Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

With La Quinta voters set to decide in November whether to prohibit short-term vacation rentals in residential neighborhoods, a new report commissioned by the city says a ban could cost millions in tax revenue and visitor spending, as well as hundreds of jobs.

But proponents of a ban argue the findings — which the city council discussed during its meeting last week — overestimate the potential impacts of the ballot initiative, which would phase out rentals in those areas by the end of 2024.

Don Shoffstall, an organizer with the Neighbors for Neighborhoods citizens group that pushed to get the ban on the ballot, called some of the predictions in the report "sheer speculation."

If the initiative wins approval, La Quinta could see a substantial drop in economic activity, with an estimated \$102 million decrease in yearly visitor spending and a \$9.5 million reduction in annual tax revenues by 2031, according to the report conducted by Tourism Economics, a global consulting firm.

The report also estimates a ban would cause the loss of 530 local jobs affiliated with the rental industry and the tourism that comes with it.

See **LA QUINTA**, Page 4A



La Quinta residents who want the city to limit short-term vacation rentals hold signs during a press conference in early 2021. JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

MORE INSIDE PAGE 3A



Mentor program success

A group of Riverside County lawyers and a judge have won national recognition for a mentoring program in the east valley. ANDY ABEYTA/THE DESERT SUN

USA TODAY

Study ties climate hazards to worsening of illnesses

Climate hazards, such as flooding, heat waves and drought, have worsened more than half of the hundreds of known infectious diseases in people, including malaria, hantavirus, cholera and even anthrax. Researchers found that 58% of human infectious diseases seemed to be made worse by one of 10 types of extreme weather connected to climate change. 13A

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Weather

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'Grease' star Olivia Newton-John dies at 73

Olivia Newton-John, the Grammy-winning superstar who reigned on pop, country, adult contemporary and dance charts with such hits as "Physical" and "You're the One That I Want" and won countless hearts as everyone's favorite Sandy in the blockbuster film version of "Grease," has died. She was 73. Newton-John, a longtime resident of Australia whose sales topped 100 million albums, died Monday at her Southern California ranch. 6A

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Observatory

Continued from Page 1A

20-30 people at the Rancho Mirage Observatory.

McLaughlin, 34, started working at the Observatory at the onset of its opening. "It opened March 25, 2018, and I started work a week before that," he said. Zuckerberg, 38, started in June of 2019.

You can tell the two get along, which is saying something for having had to live through a pandemic, both working in the small space of the Observatory's office, the Houston, if you will, amid numerous shutdowns to the public.

Both are scientists with backgrounds in engineering among other specialties, including mechanical engineering, engineering physics and astronomy for McLaughlin, and aviation engineering technology, astronomy and astrophysics for Zuckerberg.

They also speak each other's language, which I like to call "star skills." Some people's brilliance shows up in skillsets like making a perfect roux or understanding the nuances of the Federal Reserve. For these two, their brilliance shows in their ability to clearly explain what it was we were looking at. As a team, they pick out nightly lists of targets some 4,000 light years away: i.e., star skills.

McLaughlin ran in to check his computer and settled on NGC 6709, an open cluster of stars 3,510 light-years away.

Clocking in at around 141 million years old, this cluster looked to me from the vantage point of a telescope on a roof in Rancho Mirage like moles that need checking. (I was the reporter with the no-tepad, writing down things like "look up 'NGC,' or the 'flying unicorn cluster' later.")

As McLaughlin fiddled with some coordinates, I asked him what makes a telescope a telescope.

"Any telescope is a combo of two focusing optics. A lot of energy goes into having your telescopes counteract the rotation of the earth."

I pretended to comprehend and made amateurish astronomy jokes and puns to deflect my own ignorance — it's intimidating for me to want to understand what's out there, and as soon as I see numbers, I freeze. (Math is not my strong suit.)

We walked back into Houston and McLaughlin debuted the CDK 700, the Big Boy Telescope, through a giant pixel of a window.

Telescopes are usually named after inventors, McLaughlin explained. CDK = Corrected Dall-Kirkham. Some stats for the telescope nerds out there: "The 27.5" primary mirror allows us to see millions of light-years away all from the floor of the Coachella Valley. Our telescope even employs a novel solution of placing two refracting telescopes end-to-end to create a periscope for viewing at a comfortable height without the need for stairs. We currently have 3 cameras for imaging the lunar surface, planets, and deep-sky objects."

Back outside on the terrace, the docents were arriving.

The beauty of the deck made it feel like you were on the stern of a ship lit by red light casting a glow on the warm wooden floor, made of a Brazilian wood called Ipe, so dense, apparently it doesn't even float.

One of the three docents, Cassidy Albrinck, 16, worked with McLaughlin to continue with finding stars. She told me she hopes to study astronomy or physics and so far, enjoyed the recent lunar eclipse as a top docent experience.

I asked Zuckerberg about the upcoming Perseids meteor shower, set to peak this summer the weekend of Aug. 12, which coincides with a full moon. Though you may not see as many shooting stars that weekend, even in the darkest of dark sky communities, August bodes well, according to my amateur in-



The roof hatch is open in preparation for the stargazing event at the Rancho Mirage Observatory on July 21.

If you go

What: Stargazing nights

When: Every month, year-round, weather permitting (dates vary, check online)

Where: Rancho Mirage Library & Observatory, 71-100 Highway 111, Rancho Mirage

Cost: Free to the public and you must sign up ahead of time. Tickets sell out absurdly fast (I tried signing up an hour after tickets opened and it was sold out, all week, but there's a waitlist.)

More info: Sign up here: www.rancho MirageLibrary.org/observatory/stargazing

You can also rent your own telescope from the library: www.rancho MirageLibrary.org/library-telescope-program.

tuition.

The Observatory's biggest competition, in my opinion, is the new In-N-Out just a few minutes down I11. Alas, this is not a story about hamburgers. Neither the bright lights of In-N-Out nor the car dealerships nearby could hamper the unexpectedly good viewing conditions so close to the highway.

To preserve night vision for seeing the dimmest objects in the sky, the Observatory team exclusively uses red lighting during the event. As such, the team assembled its red-light accoutrement: docents donning glowing arm bands, and McLaughlin and Zuckerberg, they both put slap bracelets around the buns in their hair, a detail I cannot help but share as it was just delightful to see. The team had the appearance of being Sahara Tent regulars at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival — ones who could point out Orion with their eyes closed.

"Test, test, test," McLaughlin said, head mic on. "Would've been nice to have

one globular," McLaughlin opined.

And it was showtime.

Upon arrival, each guest was given a safety cover, or what looked like a homemade beer cozy with a plastic lens. Participants with glasses didn't need the safety cozy.

For the next hour-plus, McLaughlin effortlessly guided the group through the cosmos.

While cool-bodied souls lounged in the dark at the River Cinemark taking in "Thor" from the comfort of their recliners, us brave souls sweated and cranked our necks upward for a good hour straight to learn about our night sky and peek through four telescopes as the summer heat lingered.

McLaughlin made clear to the audience of 30: "If you do not see anything in the telescope, please let us know."

There's this little-known psychological phenomenon in humans who go to stargazing events: many people pretend to see what's in the telescope even if they

can't see anything. McLaughlin confirmed this phenomenon.

I admit to having done this — like a pack mentality survival of the fittest thing? Here, there was no shame in not seeing.

At one point, McLaughlin pulled a laser pointer out of a cooler — you have to keep lasers in a cooler when there is an excessive heat warning or they won't work. He pointed the green beam of light up into the dark sky and we watched him maneuver the pointer between flight patterns at the Palm Springs International Airport.

"That plane is finally out of the way," McLaughlin joked as he pointed out Antares.

People politely waited their turn to peek through the eye holes of each telescope. My notes began to melt together as I was hypnotized by the heat and McLaughlin's range of facts:

"3,500 light years away. The light has been traveling for that long. Oh! We have another open-cluster, the Tweedle Dumm Cluster. The field view should be filled with nice, bright stars. Blue is a hotter star, red, cooler, nebulosity ... Milky Way ... nebulae consume gas, leaving behind stars ..."

Eventually, as I sat in the corner under the glow of a red light, I wrote, in some kind of attempt to summarize my astronomical overwhelm:

Lots of words.

For the grand finale, the group fell into line and walked up the back ramp to the Big Boy Telescope Observatory, where there was air conditioning, and seating.

A few hot and sleepy people snuck out early, awaiting, as I did, the cold blast of car AC and a good night's sleep.

We were in silence over the burrrrrring of the movement of this giant machine. A bunch of human strangers seated in silence as the telescope shifted coordinates, the dome roof opening panels to new night sky.

The telescope clicked into place. "We are looking at the last breath of a dying star," McLaughlin said.

A hush fell over the dome as some clouds momentarily paused the viewing of the M13, a globular cluster whose light, as it reaches Earth, is over 25,000 years old.

There was time for questions, and my favorite came from a little boy still wide-awake on his dad's shoulders:

"That Xbox controller controls that?" the kid said, pointing to the remote and telescope.

We laughed and McLaughlin happily admitted that yes, they can move the telescope with a video game controller.

"I hope you take hope looking up outside," McLaughlin said.



Astronomer Eric McLaughlin prepares for the stargazing event at the Rancho Mirage Observatory on July 21. To preserve human night vision, they use red lighting. PHOTOS: TAYA GRAY/THE DESERT SUN

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