EAT DRINK PLAY: Three ways to make guacamole, from the classic Mexican dish to much more creative recipes. F1

The Mercury News
Sunday

BayArea NewsGroup 24/7 COVERAGE: MERCURYNEWS.COM $2.50 111 MARCH 24, 2019

Play Ball! Our 72-page baseball preview magazine takes an in-depth look at the A's, the Giants, the league.
SEE INSIDE (for subscribers)

LIVING IN THE BAY AREA

WANT OUT? YOU'RE NOT ALONE

With high rents, homelessness, traffic, pricey food and raging wildfires all threatening our way of life, most people say the quality of life in the Bay Area has become unsatisfactory

JEFF DURHAM — BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

By Louis Hansen
lhansen@bayareanewsgroup.com

Despite a booming economy, pleasant climate and natural treasures, nearly two-thirds of Bay Area residents say the quality of life here has gotten worse in the past five years, according to a new poll.

They cite a litany of reasons: high housing prices, traffic jams, the cost of living and homelessness. It's so bad that about 44 percent say they are likely to move out of the Bay Area in the next few years, with 6 percent saying they have definite plans to leave this year.

The poll, conducted for this news organization and the Silicon Valley Leadership Group, reflects the paradox of Bay Area life — how does a thriving job center with world-class universities and culture stir such dissatisfaction and misery in its people?

Home prices have risen at a record pace since early 2012. Commutes have grown longer and congestion has become worse as workers move farther away for affordable housing.

"It's a mix of hopelessness and understanding," said Clint Caldwell, 26, a recruiter at a San Francisco tech firm who

LIFE » PAGE 8

WHAT THEY'RE SAYING

65%
Quality of life in the Bay Area is worse

44%
Likely to leave the Bay Area in next few years

Source: FM3 research poll

SEE PAGE A8 FOR MORE

JUST A LITTLE BOOST

Wealthy parent, lucky student

How families with money help get their children into top-tier schools

By John Woolfolk
jwoolfolk@bayareanewsgroup.com

The national college admissions scandal has renewed focus on an uncomfortable truth: If mom and dad have the means, there are plenty of legal ways to boost an otherwise average student's chances to get into a coveted university.

The scandal involved what authorities this month described as an illegal "side door" scheme of parents paying a California consultant who either bribed college coaches to flag their unathletic children as freshman recruits or paid proxies to cheat and inflate entrance exam scores. Many of those parents — including a dozen from Silicon Valley — are due in federal court in Boston on Friday to face conspiracy and fraud charges.

But for years, monied families have been taking advantage of legacy connections; coaches for applications, essays and tests; club sports; and large donations

COLLEGE » PAGE 8

JUSTIN SULLIVAN — GETTY IMAGES

Stanford is among the universities that have been implicated in the widespread elite college admission bribery scheme.

17-PAGE COMPLAINT

San Jose foster care provider blasted

Licenses for Unity Care's homes revoked: CEO says, 'We simply failed'

By Julia Prodis Sulek
jsulek@bayareanewsgroup.com

To celebrate its 25-year anniversary providing "safe, secure and positive living environments" to thousands of local foster children, San Jose-based Unity Care threw a sold-out gala last summer at Club Auto Sport featuring Oprah Winfrey's longtime boyfriend, Stedman Graham.

Within four months, the state of California — in a rare move — took action to revoke the licenses of Unity Care's five San Jose foster homes that were part of a new program serving the highest-risk foster youths.

In a legal action obtained by the Bay Area News Group, the state Department of Social Ser-

UNITY » PAGE 10

RUSSIA INVESTIGATION

Trump's legal troubles far from over as Mueller probe ends

By Rosalind S. Helderman and David A. Fahrenthold
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON » For 22 months, Donald Trump's presidency has been haunted largely by one legal foe, a Washington prosecutor with seemingly unlimited power, but was also a single target for Trump to portray as the leader of an unfair "witch hunt."

And yet even as one legal cloud lifts with the conclusion of special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation, others loom large on the horizon, creating additional threats to the president's standing as he seeks to shift attention toward his 2020 re-election campaign.

Nearly every organization Trump has run over the past decade remains under investigation by state or federal authorities, and he is mired in a variety of civil litigation, with the center of gravity shifting from Mueller's offices in southwest Washington to Capitol Hill and state and federal courtrooms in New York, the president's hometown and the headquarters of his company.

Federal prosecutors in New York have been investigating hush money paid before the 2016 election to two women who

TRUMP » PAGE 11

NEWS ON THE GO
Download Bay Area News Digest from the app store for your iPhone.

INDEX

Business E1
Classifieds CA2
Local B1
Lottery A2
Movies B10
Obituaries B13
Puzzles B18
TV B19

WEATHER
H: 65-67 **L:** 49-50
Full report on **B20**

MediaNews Group
Subscribe: MercuryNews.com
©2019

ELITE ROOTER
Free Estimates
(408) 430-1006
www.EliteRooterSanJose.com
DRAIN CLEANING SPECIAL
$69* IT DRAINS OR IT'S FREE!
Not valid with any other offers or services.
*Must have accessible cleanout.
$50 OFF* PLUMBING SERVICE
Not valid with any other offers or services.
FREE CAMERA INSPECTION
With any drain cleaning service.
15% OFF Senior/Military Discount
*Up to $250 value
Not valid with any other offers or services.
Financing Available

RAY CHAVEZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Matt, no last name provided, and his dog, Cassidy, display a sign saying, "Stranded, hungry, trying to get home," in San Francisco. Many Bay Area residents polled cited increasing homelessness as a reason for wanting to move elsewhere.

OPINIONS ON THE BAY AREA

Results of a recent poll that asked voters in the Bay Area about major problems, quality of life and whether they would be inclined to leave

Q: Rate these problems facing the Bay Area as extremely serious, very serious, somewhat serious or not too serious

Problem	Extremely serious or very serious
The cost of housing	83%
The cost of living	81%
Homelessness	79%
Traffic congestion	76%
Increasing wildfires	70%
Climate change	68%
The cost of healthcare	68%
Division between parties	61%
The quality of public education	58%
Long-term water availability	57%

Q: Do you think that in the last five years the quality of life in the Bay Area has gotten: better, worse or stayed the same?

	Better	Stayed the same	Worse
ALL VOTERS	7%	23%	65%
COUNTIES			
Alameda	7%	22%	67%
Contra Costa	4%	28%	62%
San Francisco	6%	17%	72%
San Mateo	10%	21%	63%
Santa Clara	9%	26%	60%

Q: "I am likely to move out of the Bay Area in the next few years." Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree?

	Strongly or somewhat agree	Strongly or somewhat disagree
ALL VOTERS	44%	50%
HOMEOWNERSHIP		
Own	35%	61%
Rent	58%	37%
ETHNICITY		
Latino	53%	43%
African American	71%	27%
Asian/Pacific Islander	38%	56%
White	39%	56%
All voters of color	50%	45%
AGE		
18-39	55%	39%
40-59	44%	52%
60+	34%	58%

FM3 Research poll conducted February 14-24. Survey consisted of 1,568 online and telephone (landline and wireless) interviews with voters in Alameda, Contra Costa, San Francisco, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties. The study is +/-3.1% at the 95% confidence level; margins of error for population subgroups within the sample will be higher. Due to rounding, not all totals will sum to 100%.

BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

Life

FROM PAGE 1

grew up in the Bay Area and rents a home in Menlo Park with his wife and three children. "That's the bargain you have to make living in the Bay Area."

The dissatisfaction spreads across political parties and county lines, according to the poll of 1,568 registered voters in five counties. Just 7 percent of respondents said life has gotten better here in the past five years, and 23 percent said it's stayed about the same.

Two in three renters sensed a decline in quality of life. And 64 percent of homeowners said things had gotten worse, despite massive and historic gains in property values and personal wealth since 2012.

San Francisco residents showed the most displeasure, with 72 percent saying life in the Bay Area has soured in recent years. Pessimism spread across ethnic groups, with black voters most often reporting a drop in the quality of life.

More than 7 in 10 respondents cited the high cost of housing and living, traffic congestion and homelessness as the region's top problems.

"The Bay Area has tremendous challenges that we must address," said Silicon Valley Leadership Group CEO Carl Guardino. "We should absolutely celebrate our strengths, but not working at our weaknesses will come at our own peril."

About two-thirds of blue collar workers said they were likely to leave the region, far more than white collar professionals (43 percent) and service workers (44 percent).

And more than half of the Latino residents and 7 in 10 black residents polled said they planned to move in the next few years.

Louise Compton, a mental health professional living in Clayton, said she and her husband expect to move after they retire.

"I really like the area, of course. It's really beautiful," said Compton, 63. "Financially, it wouldn't make a lot of sense to stay here."

David Metz, president of FM3 Research, which conducted the poll, said locals felt a similar angst about Bay Area life during the dot-com era in the early 2000s, but this new poll suggests those fears are stronger today.

Wage growth is falling behind the rapid escalation of housing prices, and the middle class is slipping further behind high earners in the Bay Area. "That gap is yawning," Metz said.

Even homeowners watching their personal wealth grow with soaring real estate prices feel isolated, he said. Family and friends can't afford to move here, and parents doubt their children will be able to stay.

"There's this invisible wall around you," Metz said.

Many respondents shared stories of struggle and persistence to stay despite mounting challenges.

Deborah Acosta, a retired chief innovation officer for the City of San Leandro, grew up in the Bay Area. At times, she's struggled financially — a bank foreclosed on her home in the Oakland Hills after a divorce and the subprime mortgage crisis.

Too many people in the Bay Area can't afford a home or apartment, especially seniors and others on fixed incomes, Acosta said.

And high costs will slow economic growth and hinder the recruitment of talented young people, she said. She worries about the region's inability to provide for the homeless.

But Acosta, 64, said she won't move, despite worsening traffic and high costs. She bought a manufactured home in a 55-plus community in San Leandro, close to her son in Oakland. "I have a toehold," she said. "I can breathe again."

Renters also feel their Bay Area dream is taking a dark turn.

"You don't really want to leave. There's so much to do around here, and opportunities," said Caldwell, who grew up in Redwood City, graduated from UC Davis and moved back home to find a job in the tech industry.

Caldwell and his wife found a Menlo Park home with below-market rent, but he knows he'll have to earn more if he wants to support his family in the Bay Area.

Roughly 80 percent of respondents in Alameda, Contra Costa and San Mateo counties called traffic a serious problem.

About three-quarters of respondents in Santa Clara County and 70 percent in San Francisco County agreed.

Voters complained in interviews about unreliable public rail and buses, high-density apartments and condos adding traffic, and the steady rise in transportation taxes and fees that never seem to make highways and transit faster and better.

Diego Vela, a software engineer, commutes from Dublin to his office in San Francisco on BART. Some days it takes as long as 90 minutes to come and go from work. It's time spent away from his wife and infant daughter, and he hates it.

Vela, 30, has a good salary that could be the envy of friends and family back home in Texas. But then he explains to outsiders the high cost of living in California.

"It looks nice," he said, "until you factor in reality."

But there's also a stubborn attachment to the Bay Area and the struggle to make it.

Rich Fellner, 61, has navigated the tech world for 35 years, switching jobs, adding new engineering skills and adapting to the changing currents of Silicon Valley commerce and innovation.

The region is always changing, and he likes it that way, he said.

"It's very competitive," said Fellner, a homeowner in San Jose. "You really have to work."

For some, the area is losing something more basic — community.

Mark Ruzon, 46, earned his doctorate in computer science from Stanford in the 1990s and chose to stay and start a career. Ruzon, his wife and four children live in Mountain View. He bikes to work at nearby Google.

But Ruzon, a native of Illinois, misses the institutions and traditions in the Midwest that bind communities together. In Silicon Valley, he said, it's hard to find a decent Fourth of July parade. Despite its vast wealth, the region lacks a civic core, he said.

"We've tried to put down roots," Ruzon said. "It's been very difficult to put down deep roots."

The poll of 1,568 registered voters in Alameda, Contra Costa, Santa Clara, San Mateo and San Francisco counties was conducted by FM3 Research for the Silicon Valley Leadership Group and Bay Area News Group. The poll, conducted Feb. 14-24, has a margin of error of +/- 3.1 percent.

Contact Louis Hansen at 408-920-5043.

College

FROM PAGE 1

as part of a multibillion-dollar annual effort to help get their kids into top schools.

"Take a typical college campus: If you take away spots in the freshman class reserved for athletes, development cases, legacies, special cases, you've probably taken away a third of your spots," said Mark Sklarow, chief executive of the Independent Educational Consultants Association. "It is, unfortunately, one of the facts of college admission. Colleges try to create a freshman class beyond just the academic numbers."

Legacies

Some private schools give children of alumni special consideration, hoping it will build a sense of community and grow alumni contributions. How much of a difference does it make? It depends on the school. Harvard University reported that more than 1 in 6 of its freshmen had a parent who attended the school. Harvard insists the application process "is the same for all," though children of alumni "may receive an additional look."

A 2015 Stanford Magazine article suggested a similar proportion of legacies admitted to Stanford, though it too emphasized that all it does is afford an applicant a second look.

Other universities don't much care that mom or dad went there. Massachusetts Institute of Technology indicated in a 2012 post that "we don't do legacy." Most public schools such as the University of California don't either, said Steven Mercer of Mercer Educational Consulting in Santa Monica, who worked in admissions and fundraising for the University of Southern California.

"Public universities don't focus on legacy, if at all," Mercer said.

For those that do consider legacy applicants, what kind of giving do they expect from their alumni? According to a 2007 study by Jonathan Meer of Stanford and Harvey S. Rosen of Princeton, the average annual alumni gift was $466, a figure heavily skewed by a few big donors. That adds up over the 18 years that parents spend grooming their kids for their alma mater. Giving, the researchers noted, dropped off significantly if the alumni child was rejected.

Educational consultants

For most middle- to upper-middle-class parents without an Ivy League diploma on the wall or a family name on a dorm at their alma mater, educational consultants are the most available option to help their ordinary progeny stand a chance at getting into an elite college. These consultants typically worked in college admissions or as high school counselors, and offer their inside knowledge of the applicant vetting process to their clients. They help students zero in on their goals and interests to steer them to suitable colleges and help them sharpen their pitch to stand out.

The California consultant at the center of this month's scandal, William Rick Singer, gave the profession a black eye — consultants say parents should be wary of those promising they can get any kid into an Ivy.

"We're not trying to game the system for our clients," said Mercer, who earned a doctorate in educational leadership from UCLA. "We're experienced educators here to help students and families navigate a system that can be difficult in order to help them find the right fit."

So what's that set you back? The most recent figures from the Independent Educational Consultants Association show average package rates across the country ranging from $4,000 to $5,400, and hourly rates averaging $200.

Mercer likens it to paying a fitness coach at a gym.

"The fees are not cheap, but a lot of families can afford what we do," he said. "We don't see it as providing an unfair advantage. We see it as providing a service."

But some charge and promise much more. According to online education news organization Inside Higher Ed, one leading consultant in 2005 was charging $9,999, and another sued a mother for failing to pay half of a $1.5 million consulting fee that helped get her daughter accepted to an Ivy League school.

As for results? Sklarow said demand in the industry, which has doubled in the past five years, shows parents find it effective.

Test preparation

While educational consultants try to guide clients to the right college, test prep services focus on boosting a key element of the application — the student's score on standardized tests, the SAT and the ACT, which most colleges use in addition to student grades to gauge their knowledge.

The recent scandal involved parents who paid to have cheaters inflate their kids' scores. But many parents pay for test prep courses.

What's that cost? At Kaplan Test Prep, perhaps the best known, online or in-person tutoring starts at $2,099 for 12 hours. It offers a refund or free additional courses if the student's score doesn't improve.

How much of a boost might that deliver? It's hard to say. A 2009 study by the National Association for College Admission Counseling found test preparation yields a "positive but small effect on standardized admission test scores," which it described as "in the neighborhood of 30 points" on the SAT, which at the time had a highest possible score of 2400. The highest today is 1600.

Kaplan spokesman Russell Schaffer called that study obsolete and flawed, noting that the SAT has been updated twice since then, most recently in 2016, and that the study didn't distinguish between "comprehensive programs like ours" and "self-study or weekend programs."

"Since there is no average or typical student, there is no average or typical score increase," Schaffer said. "Some SAT prep students come to us already at a 1200 and can only raise their score by 400 points more, since the highest score possible is 1600. But those last 400 points are actually more challenging to get."

'Patrician sports'

Another avenue for getting average students into elite schools, exploited in the recent scam, is through recruitment to what ProPublica senior editor Daniel Golden, an authority on the influence of wealth in college admissions, called "patrician sports." Examples include rowing or "crew," lacrosse, fencing and water polo.

"Colleges favor recruits in these sports at least partly for fundraising reasons," Golden, author of the 2006 book "The Price of Admission: How America's Ruling Class Buys Its Way into Elite Colleges — and Who Gets Left Outside the Gates," wrote in a recent column. "They're important to wealthy alumni and donors who played them in college or enjoy them as leisure activities."

But he added that these also often are sports more likely to be offered by private college preparatory schools than urban public schools.

San Jose's public Independence High School offers football, baseball and softball, basketball, soccer, wrestling, tennis, swimming, golf, volleyball, track and cross country.

Atherton's Sacred Heart, where high school tuition is $44,655, offers all that plus lacrosse and water polo.

Do the specialized sports help students get in? Sklarow said only if it's a genuine interest. And Mercer said the recent scandal will likely prompt colleges, which typically take students at their word on their applications, to crack down on athletic recruitment and view it more critically.

"Something that's easy for universities to change is to lock down the incoming pipeline for their sports," Mercer said. "That's an easy fix."

Donations

For the truly affluent, a generous gift to a prestigious university has long been known to afford the donor's child special consideration in the admissions process, something Singer called the "back door" when he pitched parents on his illegal scheme.

Former eBay and Hewlett-Packard CEO Meg Whitman donated $30 million to build Princeton's Whitman College residence hall before her two sons, Griffith and William Harsh, got into her alma mater.

But to the extent a donation can grease an average kid's application to a haughty school, it's hardly the most economical route, particularly at elite Ivy League schools.

"Today it's probably $10 million and up," said Sklarow.

He and others add that it's increasingly rare, and not just because few can donate at that level.

"I've never seen colleges blatantly sell admission spots," Mercer said.

"Decades ago that may have been a process, but universities worked so hard over the last few decades to build their brand of being desirable and worthy, and that doesn't come from selling admissions to donors. So when it happens, and I think it happens rarely, the price of admission is high."

Contact John Woolfolk at 408-920-5782.