

Zoo CEO leaving after controversies

Peterson set to retire in August following concerns about worker safety, animal welfare

By Tara Duggan

Tanya Peterson, the embattled longtime leader of the San Francisco Zoo, is stepping down from her position as CEO and executive director. Peterson plans to retire in August, according to public relations consultant Sam Singer. The move comes less than a week after Singer said Peterson had “no intention of leaving.” But San Francisco Mayor Daniel Lurie on Friday had called for new leadership of the nonprofit organization that runs the city-owned

zoo, which has been dogged by controversy since an April 2024 Chronicle investigation revealed concerns about worker safety and animal welfare. In a statement, Singer said that Peterson thanked the board, employees and animals at the San Francisco Zoo & Gardens and noted that it has been an honor to serve the “amazing” zoo community. Lurie, in a statement Tuesday, said that “under new, stable leadership, the San Francisco Zoo has the opportunity to reach new heights. I want to thank Tanya

Peterson for her service to the zoo and our city. I look forward to working with the board and the new leadership to improve our zoo and fulfill the rare and exciting opportunity to bring pandas to our city.” Marie-Claude Nadeau, co-chair of the board of the Zoological Society, did not immediately respond to a request to comment. In May, the former board chair of the Zoological Society attempted to oust Peterson, and at least eight board members have resigned since last May. Over her long tenure, Peterson oversaw renovations of the zoo’s aging chimpanzee and orangutan facilities and the building of a *Zoo continues on A7*



San Francisco Zoo CEO Tanya Peterson, shown in 2011 visiting a hippo exhibit, is stepping down after the mayor urged change.

Paul Chinn/S.F. Chronicle

Harrowing tale of survival on Lake Tahoe



Photos by William Hale Irwin/For the S.F. Chronicle

Dani Johnston surveys damage to her boat at the Tahoe City Marina. Johnston and her guests survived when their boat capsized.

As deadly squall swept in, recent grads and parents fought for lives

By Anna Bauman

The sky darkened over the Johnston family and its guests aboard a luxury ski boat on Lake Tahoe. Within minutes, a cold wind whipped up waves so big they threatened to inundate the craft. The boat’s passengers had just finished a leisurely lunch onshore, during a celebratory excursion on a relatively placid day. Now they were in deep trouble. As her husband manned the steering wheel, 53-year-old Dani Johnston or-



Emergency personnel assist crews lifting damaged boats that had washed ashore after a sudden storm on June 21.

dered the passengers — her 22-year-old son and his seven friends — to do two things: put on life jackets and bail water from the boat using anything they could find. Then she called 911. Answering, South Lake Tahoe dispatcher Nicole Sykes could hear only screaming. It was around 2:20 p.m. on June 21. Then the line disconnected. Sykes sent a text to the caller instead: “What is your emergency?” The response was direct *Tahoe continues on A9*

CEQA reform passes — but will it work?

By J.K. Dineen, Laura Waxmann and Sara Libby

The titanic shift in California housing policy orchestrated by Gov. Gavin Newsom on Monday night, resulting in the rewriting of large parts of the California Environmental Quality Act, will allow him to spend his final 18 months in office trying to correct one of his biggest policy failures unencumbered by what he views as a key roadblock. Newsom and housing advocates have long blamed the CEQA environmental review process for the state’s inability to keep up with growing housing demand. But with the legislation passed Monday, those reviews have been severely curtailed. As pro-housing advocates celebrated one of their biggest victories in years and environmentalists decried the potential damage from the new laws, one question went largely unasked: Will they work? While CEQA lawsuits from environmental groups and neighbors across California — often a single neighbor — have protected open space, thwarted polluters and spared pristine coastlines from luxury resorts, Newsom and housing advocates believe they have also been weaponized to bog down and kill badly needed housing, and in doing so, have helped make housing more expensive and less ac- *Housing continues on A8*

Oakland schools pay off loan, but crisis looms

By Jill Tucker

After 22 years under state oversight, the Oakland school board was finally on its own Tuesday, its seven squabbling members fully in control of the district’s finances and fate. A new interim superintendent added to the fresh start with her first day on the job. On Monday, officials sent their final payment to Sacramento for a \$100 million bailout loan issued

in 2003, when the district ran out of cash and couldn’t pay its bills, triggering a state takeover. There were supposed to be balloons and congratulatory speeches to celebrate the return to local control. But there was little acknowledgment, no cake, no Champagne toast. Instead, there were only dire predictions that Oakland schools will end up in the same bailout boat in the not-too-distant future. “It wasn’t supposed to feel like this,” said school board member Mike Hutchinson, of the loan payoff. “Who could have imagined after all this work?” To be sure, the district has made significant progress since 2003. At the time, fiscal controls and accounting practices were so lacking that few even foresaw the city’s schools heading toward imminent bankruptcy. All that has been fixed, auditors confirmed before handing the keys back to local officials.

Elected leaders now have a clear picture of district finances and can see they are headed for insolvency and another possible state takeover halfway through the 2026-27 school year unless they reconcile the budget. The school board has for the past two decades continued to spend more than it receives in funding, using accounting maneuvers and one-time money, including the bailout loan and, *Loan continues on A7*