

TEMPORARY GREAT PARK VENUE • CITY HALL TENSIONS • MICROSOFT GETS FTC COMPLAINT

IRVINE

WEEKLY

MARCH 8, 2024 • VOL. 6 • NO. 3

A photograph of A.R. The Mermaid in a kitchen setting. She is the central figure, wearing a white, distressed, lace-trimmed crop top and a black choker with spikes. She has long, straight black hair and is wearing colorful, multi-colored eye makeup. She is holding a large, white, rectangular lollipop with pink and white frosting in her mouth. In her other hand, she holds a pink and white lollipop. She is surrounded by other women in the background, some wearing pink chef hats and aprons, suggesting a baking or cooking event. The scene is brightly lit, and there are various kitchen items and desserts visible on the counter in the foreground.

A.R. The Mermaid
is A Hip-hop Anime Heroine

By Brett Callwood

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TENSIONS CONTINUE TO RISE OVER MIDDLE EASTERN CONFLICT INSIDE IRVINE CITY HALL

WHILE THE IRVINE CITY COUNCIL HAS NOT ADOPTED A CEASEFIRE RESOLUTION, RESIDENTS ARGUE THAT SIMPLY ADDRESSING THE TOPIC OF THE ONGOING CONFLICT INVITES HOSTILITY INTO THE COUNCIL CHAMBER.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

The Irvine City Council continues to combat rising tension during its public meetings as citizens sharing altering viewpoints over the Middle Eastern conflict continue to clash locally.

Inside City Hall, a division between supporters of Israel and supporters of Palestine has created a sometimes hostile atmosphere that continues to be the source of noticeable disruption to council business.

Members of Irvine's Jewish community have come forward during council meetings with concern over the environment that is developing inside City Hall, claiming there has been hate speech against Jewish community members from supporters of a ceasefire.

Jewish residents in Irvine have also voiced frustration and fear, adding that members of their community are being targeted because of their religion, as Israel continues to attack Gaza.

Recent statistics on hate crime and hate incidents provided by Irvine Police Chief Micheal Kent show that a total of 46 anti-

Jewish hate incidents have occurred in Irvine since 2018.

For context, the California Penal Code defines a hate crime as a crime committed based on factual or assumed characteristics including gender, disability, race or ethnicity, and religion of the victim.

Contrarily, a hate incident is not a crime, according to the California Department of Justice. A hate incident involves an act that includes hateful speech, displaying or distributing hateful material. The U.S. Constitution does not suppress hate speech until it impacts the victims constitutional rights.

The report also revealed that 10 anti-Jewish incidents were reported in 2023. An additional four anti-Jewish hate incidents have been reported to the Irvine Police Department since January.

The report also showed that five anti-Jewish hate crimes occurred in 2023, with a total of 11 since 2018.

Irvine's Arabic community has not reported a hate incident since 2023, and has reported a total of 13 anti-Arab hate incidents since 2018.

This year, the Irvine Police Department





PHOTO: CHRIS HEARN VIA UNSPLASH

has received two reports of anti-Arab hate crimes, while none were reported in 2023.

Since October, heated verbal exchanges between members of the audience have become commonplace in Irvine's City Council chambers. Outbursts riddled with xenophobic and antisemitic exchanges between members of the public have also caused Irvine Mayor Farrah Khan to call for a recess.

Hundreds of public speakers over the past several meetings have urged the Irvine City Council to adopt a ceasefire resolution. While the council has not placed a ceasefire resolution on the agenda, council members have individually denounced the violence.

The council has also denounced hate speech within the chamber.

However, the council's inaction on a ceasefire resolution has sparked debate from members of Irvine's Jewish community over the council's responsibility to control hate speech and antisemitism within the chamber.

Moreso, residents in Irvine have also voiced concern over the council's ability to discuss non-municipal issues during council meetings. Last year, residents filed an ethics complaint against Irvine Mayor Farrah Khan and Vice Mayor Larry Agran.

The ethics complaint alleged that despite

the absence of a ceasefire resolution, both Agran and Khan voiced their opinions about the international conflict, which is against city policy.

Irvine City Attorney Jeff Melching reported finding no ethical missteps by either council member.

On Tuesday, Feb. 17, Melching reported that an additional ethics complaint was filed against the council alleging that council violated the city's Rules of Decorum and Rules on Subject Matter Jurisdiction by allowing public speakers to continuously address Israel-Palestine conflict.

Addressing the atmosphere at meetings over the last several weeks, Melching said the behavior he has witnessed in the chamber is unprecedented. He also noted that despite opposing viewpoints, speaking at a city council meeting is a constitutional right, regardless of subject matter.

"People coming to speak at a public meeting are exercising their constitutional right, and the city does not have the tools to stop somebody from speaking just because their speech is hateful," he said.

Melching explained that there was little the city could do to prevent members of the public from speaking on non-agendized items.

"The city has attempted to maintain order. This is a highly charged environment



PHOTO: LATRACH MED JAMIL VIA UNSPLASH

with a lot of people that have extremely strong opinions about this subject and there have been a number of outbursts," he said. "There has been effort to control those outbursts both through the conduct of the mayor, and through the presence of the police."

While he found no ethical wrongdoing, Melching noted that the city has the responsibility to provide a platform for all members of the public who wish to speak the ability to do so.

"I haven't found any attempt to be unfair or biased on one side or another in these public comments," he said. "What I've found is an effort of the city to recognize these unique circumstances and adapt, and is designed to ensure that people have the ability to speak."

Given the tense environment at previous meetings, Khan, on Tuesday, Feb. 13, announced modifications to the meeting's schedule that would allow the council to conduct business without disruption while still honoring public comments.

"Those of you here this evening know that during the past several months we have continued to hear from hundreds of public speakers who have shared their opinions with the council regarding the tragic events unfolding in the Middle East," Khan said. "No matter what you think about the situation, and no matter what side you represent, I want to reiterate my belief that all of us in Irvine should be heartened that here in our community we've been able to let everyone's opinion be heard."

MUSIC



A.R. THE MERMAID. PHOTO: LEE ROSE

MAKING A SPLASH

A.R. THE MERMAID'S HORRORCORE-TRAP IS MAGIC.

BY BRETT CALLWOOD

Even in this current musical climate where hip-hop is at least as popular and important as any other genre of music and, as a result, we're seeing new rappers emerge almost on a daily basis, A.R. The nMermaid stands out. With her leather collars, chains, flamboyant makeup and general vibe of "fuck around and find out," the Memphis-born artist is visually striking before you've even heard her music. In conversation, her charisma is entrancing. Oozing confidence and dripping with Memphis drawl, A.R. wears a massive grin throughout the Zoom call. She knows that there is a buzz surrounding her right now, and she's determined to enjoy it.

A.R. first emerged as a 15-year-old, singing with R&B group Karma. "I started out in a singing group," she says. It was a learning experience for sure. I learned a lot from the situation, but it wasn't for me, the group situation."

She decided that she would be better off going it alone, forging ahead as a solo artist. That's been the case for a few years now.

"Equally under the influence of anime a la High-Rise Invasion and Pokémon (GenGAR inspired her eyebrows!) as well as Hoodrich Pablo Juan, YoungBoy Never Broke Again, Sauce Walka, and Money Man, she grabbed a mic and taught herself how to rap. Initially, she gained traction with 'Try Me' in 2019," reads a statement.

A.R. is still based in Memphis, a scene she describes as “popping off.” But still, one must imagine that she sticks out in the southern city’s burgeoning rap scene. There’s something very punk rock about her vibe, and not in a store-bought “Hot Topic” sort of way. She’s a rebel, in that she doesn’t seem to want to follow any trodden path. Her style, both visually and musically, is her own. The fact that she was in a promising young vocal R&B group and said “Nope, not for me,” is proof of that.

“Fans clamored for more as she grew her social media following,” continues that same statement. “‘Come Outside’ and ‘First Day Out’ maintained her momentum before she caught fire with ‘Let A Ho Play.’ Powered up by her uncontainable hustle, off-kilter rhymes, and undeniable chant, it reeled over 1 million cumulative views and streams. Not to mention, superstars such as SZA and K. Michelle touted it on social media, while Drake followed her.”

In December, A.R. the Mermaid released the “No Motion” single, a collaboration with fellow Memphis artist K Carbon.

“You know, it was really just a fun time in the studio,” A.R. says. It was just a normal day in the studio.”

When it comes to her dream collab, A.R. understandably lists Megan Thee Stallion. This is, after all, a golden time for female hip-hop artists.

“Females have always been colorful,” she says. “We were just looked over forever and it was harder for females to get on. Nicki (Minaj) and Megan made it easier. They were definitely harder.”

Ultimately though, “female hip-hop” isn’t a genre, no matter how much we want to celebrate the many strong, incredibly talented artists that continue to emerge. A.R. has been described as horrorcore-trap and “raw n’ raunchy.” All of that applies, and one could imagine her to be among the next crop of rappers to make the step up into the big leagues. Not only is she simply that good, but her style, her delivery, is suitably unique.

“Just coming up for air after a quiet grind, A.R. The Mermaid has buzzed out of Memphis as her city’s fieriest outlier,” they say. “She has gained traction with the likes of ‘Let A Ho Play’ and freestyles such as ‘No Motion.’ At the same time, she has all the makings of a style icon with the vibrant presentation of a real-life anime heroine.”

That’s a great description of A.R. The Mermaid – a “real-life anime heroine.” One could easily picture her as a Fortnite skin, or as an anime character, or both. She’s larger than life, yet her lyrics are grounded and that’s a touchline to balance on.

That’s in part why her June ’23 collab with social media force Sukihana on the song “Suki” works so wonderfully well.

The track continues to illuminate her dynamic presence as she exudes attitude and charisma all at once in between a buoyant beat,” they said. “Shot in Miami, the accompanying visual adds even more fire to ‘Suki.’ Serving as the perfect accompaniment to the track, Love & Hip-Hop: Miami star, rapper and social media force Sukihana notably makes an eye-catching cameo in the clip!”

Sukihana is another larger-than-life character, and that collaboration made sense. That said, A.R. doesn’t need anyone to amplify her awesomeness.

The “Watt We Doingg” single featured a spellbinding sample of Rick James’ “Give it to Me Baby.”

“She drops one eyebrow-raising bar after another topped off with warnings such as, ‘Soy she love me. Can’t fall for it, boo,’” they said. “As showcased by the track, she asserts herself as an individual through and through with sound and creativity like no one else in Memphis or the game at large.”

It all points to the fact that A.R. The Mermaid is as close to a magical figure as we have in real-life hip-hop. She’s entering the scene on a wave of positivity, joy and color. She might stick out her tongue and flip the bird, but she’s doing it with a wink and a smile, and it’s easy to get on board with that air of gleeful anarchy.

Is A.R. a real mermaid? Of course not – mermaids don’t exist. But her musical magic is just as much fun as fishy people. Probably more. A.R. is certainly determined to have fun in 2024.

“(I’ll be) back on the gas,” she says. “I will drop singles, and festivals for the summer.”

Be sure to extend your Ariel for this little mermaid.

A.R. The Mermaid’s “No Motion” is out now.



A.R. THE MERMAID. PHOTO: LEE ROSE

NEWS

FTC FILES COMPLAINT OVER BLIZZARD LAYOFFS POST-MICROSOFT MERGER

THE ELIMINATION OF 1,900 EMPLOYEES AT BLIZZARD ACTIVISION IN JANUARY SPARKED MORE SCRUTINY OVER THE POTENTIAL LACK OF COMPETITION IN THE CLOUD, CONSOLE AND SUBSCRIPTION GAMING MARKETS.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

The termination of 1,900 employees within Blizzard Entertainment's video gaming division in January has caught the attention of the Federal Trade Commission.

The FTC, on Wednesday, Feb. 7, filed a complaint with the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit alleging that the layoffs at Blizzard contradicted Microsoft's previous promise to continue the independent operation of Blizzard post-merger.

The commission is now seeking an injunction on Microsoft's \$69 billion merger of Blizzard Activision, which was completed in October.

In the letter to the court, FTC attorney Imad D. Abyad wrote, "This newly-revealed information contradicts Microsoft's representations in this proceeding, which seeks to temporarily pause Microsoft's acquisition of Activision pending the FTC's evaluation of the merger's antitrust merits."

In response to the letter filed by the FTC, a Microsoft spokesperson provided Irvine Weekly with the following

statement – "In continuing its opposition to the deal, the FTC ignores the reality that the deal itself has substantially changed. Since the FTC lost in court last July, Microsoft was required by the U.K. Competition Authority to restructure the acquisition globally and therefore did not acquire the cloud streaming rights to Activision Blizzard games in the United States. Additionally, Sony and Microsoft signed a binding agreement to keep Call of Duty on PlayStation on even better terms than Sony had before."

In July, Microsoft won an antitrust lawsuit filed by the FTC, in which the commission alleged that the blockbuster merger would lessen competition in the cloud, console and subscription gaming markets.

In the FTC case ruling, U.S. District Judge Jacqueline Corley referred to the merger as "the largest in tech history," adding that "scrutiny has paid off." However, in her denial of the FTC lawsuit, Corley wrote that the FTC failed to prove how the merger would substantially lessen competition – "To



PHOTO COURTESY EVAN J. LANCASTER, IRVINE WEEKLY

the contrary, the record evidence points to more consumer access to Call of Duty and other Activision content. The motion for a preliminary injunction is therefore DENIED."

On Thursday, Feb. 8, lawyers for Microsoft responded to the FTC's request for an injunction, emphasizing that the cause behind the reductions at Blizzard could not be attributed to the recent merger with Microsoft.

"Consistent with broader trends in the gaming industry, Activision was already planning on eliminating a significant number of jobs while still operating as an independent Company," the letter read. "The recent announcement thus cannot be attributed fully to the merger. More importantly, Microsoft continues fully to stand behind its representations to this Court."

The recent layoffs at Blizzard were announced via an internal memo from Xbox CEO Phil Spencer on January 15. In the letter, Spencer explained that the company would be "committed to aligning" with a "sustainable cost structure."

"As part of this process, we have made the painful decision to reduce the size of our gaming workforce by approximately 1,900 roles out of the 22,000 people on our team," Spencer wrote. "The Gaming Leadership Team and I are committed to navigating this

process as thoughtfully as possible."

After nearly two years of antitrust lawsuits, international investigations and gaming industry scrutiny surrounding Microsoft's \$69 billion mission to purchase Activision Blizzard, the historic deal was finalized on Friday, Oct. 13.

With a closing price tag of \$68.7 billion, the deal is now Microsoft's largest to-date purchase, eclipsing the Windows software developer's 2016 purchase of the professional social networking platform LinkedIn for \$26.2 billion.

With the deal, Microsoft assumes ownership of Blizzard's popular gaming catalog that includes many titles that have accumulated a cult-like following including the Diablo series, Warcraft, the Call of Duty franchise and all of the Tony Hawk's Pro Skater games.

As part of the contingencies to satisfy worries of regulators in the United Kingdom, Microsoft agreed to enter into a 15-year cloud gaming agreement with Ubisoft in August that would give Ubisoft complete cloud gaming rights to Call of Duty and all other Activision titles.

Speaking on developments with Ubisoft, Smith said it would bring innovation and allow Ubisoft to have full control to commercialize the distribution of games on a global scale.

GREATER IRVINE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE NAMES DAVE CAFFARO INTERIM CEO

THE ANNOUNCEMENT FOLLOWS
THE DEPARTURE OF FORMER
PRESIDENT AND CEO BRYAN
STARR IN DECEMBER.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

The Greater Irvine Chamber of Commerce announced the appointment of a new Interim Chief Executive Officer in January. In a statement, the Chamber introduced Dave Caffaro, who served as the interim CEO at the Irvine-based Second Harvest Food Bank between 2018 and 2019.

As a graduate of Peter F. Drucker Graduate School of Management at the Claremont Graduate University, Caffaro has built a reputation as a strategic advisory, keynote speaker and author.

Currently, Caffaro serves as the Principal of Strategic Advisory Consulting Group and the co-founder of the fintech firm Atticus.

Lisa Thomas, Chair of the Greater Irvine Chamber Board of Directors, expressed her excitement for the addition of Caffaro's financial expertise to Chamber operations.

"Dave's strategic approach, financial leadership and experience in Irvine will be instrumental in leading the Chamber forward," Thomas said. "We have great confidence in Dave's ability to serve the needs of our membership and positively impact the overall business community in the greater Irvine area."

Speaking on how he will approach

leadership in his new position with the Great Irvine Chamber of Commerce, Caffaro said he plans to keep things consistent.

"What I do know is really a simple philosophy as we begin our 45th year. We're doing exactly the same as we did in our first year, which is focusing on our members. We're a very transparent organization," Caffaro said. "My view is that we want to share where we are, where we're going, how we get there, how we continue to earn relevance with our members."

In terms of experience, Caffaro has also worked as the head of International Trade Strategy for Bank of America and as well as a professor of Strategic Management and Business Policy at California State University, Fullerton.

Caffaro said he plans to facilitate growth within Irvine's business community and continue Irvine's reputation as the number one city to launch a company.

"Irvine's economy is the envy of all California cities. I'm honored to help guide this vital organization and help our members and the city continue to thrive," he said. "One of my first tasks – one I'm really excited about – is to meet with as many members and stakeholders as possible to understand the value the Greater

Irvine Chamber brings to this community. That starts Day One."

"But my philosophy is always the same: understand the stakeholders, understand what's important to them, find a way to deliver what's important and see if there are opportunities to grow," he continued.

The appointment of Caffaro follows the abrupt departure of former Chamber President and CEO Bryan Starr in December.

Speaking on Starr's departure, the chamber expressed gratitude for the former president's service.

"Bryan's service has had an undeniable impact on Irvine's economy. His work helped bring global companies – and their jobs and investment – to Irvine. During the pandemic, he guided the Chamber skillfully through the crisis. And he was an advocate for all Irvine

businesses," the memo read. "We're also proud that, under Bryan's leadership, the Chamber was honored with Five-Star Accreditation by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (the highest possible rating), the President's E-Award for Export Service from the US Department of Commerce, the U.S. Small Business Administration's Community Excellence Chamber Award and numerous chamber industry awards."

The former Chamber CEO, as of Monday, Jan. 22, added Partner at Rialta Alliance to his LinkedIn profile. Starr does not list a company website or contact information for Rialta Alliance.

Starr's LinkedIn also indicates that he joined the Greater Irvine Chamber of Commerce in May 2017 after spending five years as Senior Vice President of the Orange County Business Council.



DAVE CAFFARO. PHOTO: COURTESY GREATER IRVINE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

NEWS

IRVINE, PACIFIC SYMPHONY PARTNERSHIP WILL BRING TEMP VENUE TO GREAT PARK

APTLY TITLED GREAT PARK LIVE, THE CITY OF IRVINE IS EXPECTED TO BRING AN OUTDOOR MUSIC VENUE TO THE GREAT PARK SPORTS COMPLEX THIS SUMMER.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER



GREAT PARK LIVE RENDERING. IMAGE COURTESY GREATER IRVINE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

The Great Park Board of Directors, on Tuesday, Feb. 27, approved \$6.6 million in funding for construction and operations contracts that will bring a temporary music venue to the Great Park.

In addition to the approval of funding, which will come from the Great Park operation budget, Irvine leaders also agreed to enter into a partnership with Pacific Symphony. Pacific Symphony will not pay rent, but in exchange, the organization will give Irvine access to educational, youth and cultural programming.

Officially titled Great Park Live, Irvine's newest music venue is expected to be completed in time for the city's 2024 concert season and will also become a summer home for the Pacific Symphony.

As for costs, Irvine will spend \$61 million on venue set-up fees, which include a main stage, audio-visual components, concessions stands, general storage and restroom facilities. Production costs, according to a staff report, will be \$500,000.

With the \$6.6 million, Irvine has hired production company PSQ Productions Inc. to oversee the operations of the facility. A staff report indicated that PSQ Productions has a 30-year reputation in Orange County and has managed several events at the Great Park, including the city's 50th Birthday celebration.

While the city continues to finalize its design process for the permanent amphitheater at the Great Park, the interim venue will cost the city approximately \$2.2 million annually.

Carmichael added that annual costs are based on the sale of 3,500 tickets or 70% of attendance of 15 shows.

"We tried to use conservative estimates here where we could. We did not assume any additional revenue outside of the show," he said. "It is worth noting that estimated costs could exceed projections."

In terms of performances, Carmichael indicated the venue could host up to 20 shows per year, with room for additional events.

"We're thinking 15-20 shows – that's five shows by the Symphony, five of the Irvine-Night type events, and then some additional commercial touring acts, and cultural and community-based events," he said.

In the years to come, Carmichael ex-

plained that local promotion company Gravity Production will assist in the recruitment of commercial acts and performances to the Great Park Live playbill.

"We feel like in our years when we get a little earlier start in the spring, the venue has a little more traction, a little more notoriety, we can increase the number of shows, but for the first year we're thinking 15."

Carmichael also said that the city is contemplating utilizing Great Park Live's food and beverage infrastructure to meet the community's need for food and beverage options in the area.

"An exciting concept is using the infrastructure of the amphitheater as a food and beverage offering – even when there isn't a show in the amphitheater," he said. "The re-fashioned shipping containers, shade, seating, lawn games and landscaping can be made available."

The outdoor venue, according to a staff report, will have a capacity of up to 5,000 guests and will be built on the North Lawn of the Great Park Sports Complex in the coming weeks.

While construction has yet to begin, Carmichael added that work to accommodate the anticipated influx of concertgoers is ongoing. Carmichael explained that the city was adding a minimum of 800 new parking stalls through the expansion of an existing parking lot nearby.

At the crux of the venue's design, Irvine's temporary music venue will resemble what once stood at the now-shuttered FivePoint Amphitheater, including the same size stage, which according to Melching, is required to fit the size of the Pacific Symphony and other national performances.

"We've secured a stage; a 60-foot by 60-foot stage – this is the same size stage at FivePoint Amphitheater – worth noting this is the stage necessary to accommodate the full complement of musicians in the Pacific Symphony," he said. "The stage really sets the site plan and sets the budget – it's a high fixed cost and really introduces an interesting opportunity for year-round amenities."

In terms of positioning, a staff report indicates the stage will be facing east, away from the nearest residential areas.