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Congress heaps criticism on Mattel

“Mattel chose to gamble with our children's health, apparently for a few extra dollars.”

— REP. JAN SCHAKOWSKY, D-Chicago

EL SEGUNDO: One leader says Americans have lost trust in the local toy maker.

By Lisa Friedman
STAFF WRITER

WASHINGTON — Congress blasted El Segundo-based toy giant Mattel Inc. on Wednesday for failing to detect the recent flood of lead paint contamination in Chinese-made Barbie dolls, Thomas and Friends train sets and millions of other toys.

Democrats and Republicans alike accused Mattel of negligence as the

House Energy and Commerce consumer protection subcommittee convened a two-day hearing on tainted toys. Several also charged the company with obstructing a congressional investigation into how the toys made their way into the hands of U.S. children.

“Mattel chose to gamble with our children's health, apparently for a few extra dollars,” said Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Chicago. The company, she said, “has forfeited the right to expect any parent to trust them.”

Added Rep. Joe Barton, R-Texas: “When you can't trust Thomas the Train and you can't trust a company like Mattel ... it's just staggering that we have to

worry about some of these issues.”

Since August, Mattel and other companies have recalled millions of toys made in China because of excessive levels of lead and small magnets that may detach. Lead may be toxic if ingested by children, causing brain damage and learning problems. Approximately 86 percent of all toys sold in the United States are manufactured in China.

The testimony came as Mattel, which produced 1.5 million of the 13.2 million toys recalled in the past month, said its tests found lead levels in paint in recalled toys as high as 200 times the accepted safety ceiling — 110,000 parts per million versus 600.

The company's chairman and chief executive, Robert A. Eckert, told lawmakers that a reading of 10,000 parts per million was typical in Mattel's tests of the tainted toys.

He apologized for the recalls, saying they “should never have happened, especially at Mattel. Our standards were ignored, and our rules were broken. We were let down, and we let you down.”

Mattel has fired several manufacturers and is beginning to inspect toys before, during and after paint applications, Eckert said. He said he plans to visit China soon to check on the inspection process.

MATTEL/A19



Eckert says his company has implemented new inspection practices.

STORM IS FLYING OUR WAY



BRUCE HAZELTON/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

It was a chilly, windy day Wednesday when Steve and Shirley Hosa fed sea gulls at Torrance Beach. What will today be like? “Almost unprecedented” for September, says the National Weather Service, as a storm originating in British Columbia makes it to Southern California, bringing cold rain and snow. The conditions are forecast to last through Saturday, with Friday being the most active. High temperatures today will be between 67 and 70 degrees in the South Bay.

Slaying of woman in El Camino Village called ‘beyond belief’

CRIME: The 76-year-old was an active great-grandmother who walked 4 miles per day.

By Larry Altman
STAFF WRITER

A woman found slain in El Camino Village was a 76-year-old great-grandmother whose assailant beat her as she walked just blocks from her home, a detective said Wednesday.

Severa G. Madrona's attacker moved her body into the backyard of a home at 152nd Street and Eriel Avenue after killing her Tuesday morning, sheriff's Sgt. Chris Brackpool said. Madrona had no connection to that house.

Investigators have not determined whether the 5-foot, 90-pound woman was robbed. She was not sexually assaulted, Brackpool said.

Madrona, a mother of eight who had 22 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren, lived on nearby 157th Street. An autopsy is scheduled, but a preliminary examination of her body indicated that Madrona was a victim of blunt force, detectives and coroner's officials said.

“She did have trauma to the upper body,” Brackpool said.

DEATH/A19

“They're saying kids aren't interested (in French), and it's not true.”

— MELISSA BEJARANO, 16, Lawndale High School student

TONGUE-TIED

Lawndale High's French program has been halted, leaving students with limited language options

By Shelly Leachman
STAFF WRITER

Decrying the move as a hit to their academic *joie de vivre*, students at Lawndale High are upset with the school's decision to cancel its French classes and jettison the teacher to another campus.

Instructor Marie Alcindor was relocated to nearby Leuzinger High, where the language is more in demand, according to officials.

“There just aren't enough students to warrant having a full-time French teacher at Lawndale,” district Superintendent Cheryl White said.

Principal Vicente Bravo said he was unsure exactly how many students wanted to study

French this fall — only that the number wasn't high enough.

It is not uncommon for districts to shift teachers among campuses depending on enrollment.

Lawndale students assert that Alcindor had five full classes last year — a combination of French 1 and 2 — and that a large majority of those students registered to continue.

Alcindor, whose name is still on the Lawndale High School Web site but so far not listed on Leuzinger's, could not be reached for comment.

“They're saying kids aren't interested, and it's not true,” said junior Melissa Bejarano, 16, who expected to take French 3 this year.

FRENCH/A19

Planners: Adult store isn't playing by the rules

HERMOSA BEACH: Officials deny expansion bid as they cite violations that center around arcade booths.

By Andrea Woodhouse
STAFF WRITER

The Hermosa Beach Planning Commission has blocked a request from a landmark Pacific Coast Highway sex shop to nearly triple its number of arcade booths, which owners installed about a year ago but just sought approval for Tuesday.

The council unanimously denied a series of zoning-code variances that would have legalized 14 booths that city officials believe the Tender Box built last summer in an upstairs area permitted only as an apartment.

“We've never seen a violation this blatant,” said eight-year commission veteran Peter Hoffman. “There is absolutely no basis to make those findings for a variance.”

The commission's decision Tuesday came in tandem with a discovery last week that somebody had bored holes through the walls of the Tender Box's new arcade booths, which have locked doors that allow patrons to privately watch pornographic videos.

Holes between the booths can facilitate sexual activity between men.

“The booths did have holes drilled in them connecting the booths and creating a ‘glory hole,’” Hermosa Police Chief Greg Savelli said Tuesday.

He added that the holes appeared professionally drilled — possibly with a circular saw — and “similar to how you create a doorknob hole,” but they were covered Monday, Savelli said.

At its location since 1973, the Tender Box does not meet existing zoning codes; it has been grandfathered into compliance.

Its 1994 conditional-use permit allows the shop to sell adult toys, novelty items and videos, as well as operate eight viewing booths on the store's bottom floor, said Ken Robertson, the city's acting commu-

TENDER BOX/A19



SEAN HILLER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The Tender Box in Hermosa Beach was told it couldn't build arcade booths, but they already exist.

HOW TO HELP

Detectives are asking for the public's help to solve the crime. Anyone with information is asked to contact the sheriff's homicide unit at 323-890-5500.

SPECTOR JUDGE: NO LESSER CHARGES

He says allowing a manslaughter option would be the same as instructing the jury to convict the music producer.

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PLENTY OF FLU VACCINE THIS TIME AROUND, CDC SAYS

WASHINGTON — Come one, come all: After years of shortages and confusion, this fall promises plenty of flu vaccine to go around — up to 132 million doses, more than the nation has ever produced.

The ample supplies have the government urging vaccinations not just for people at highest risk of dying from influenza, but for anyone who wants to avoid a week of aching misery.

“Flu is a formidable foe,” Dr. Julie Gerberding, head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said Wednesday. “It is not an illness we

should be complacent about.”

Shots aren't the only option. The government ruled Wednesday that it's safe for younger kids to try a nasal-spray vaccine called FluMist. Once only an option for people ages 5 to 49, FluMist now can be used by children as young as 2.

Flu usually peaks in February, so a winter vaccination isn't too late. Still, Gerberding advised seeking vaccine early in case flu begins striking before the usual November.

— The Associated Press

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