

In California, countless redwoods, giant sequoias and Joshua trees have perished in wildfires this year. The blackened wreckage sends a clear message: These trees are in the fight of their lives.



They Are Among the World's Oldest Living Things. The Climate Crisis Is Killing Them.

By JOHN BRANCH | Photographs by MAX WHITTAKER | Page A21

Left Is Pushing Biden to Slash Student Debts

This article is by Erica L. Green, like Broadwater and Stacy Cowley.

WASHINGTON — President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr. is facing pressure from congressional Democrats to cancel student loan debt on a vast scale, quickly and by executive action, a campaign that will be one of the first tests of his relationship with the liberal wing of his party.

Mr. Biden has endorsed canceling \$10,000 in federal student debt per borrower through legislation, and insisted that chipping away at the \$1.7 trillion in loan debt held by more than 43 million borrowers is integral to his economic plan. But Democratic leaders, backed by the party's left flank, are pressing for up to \$50,000 of debt relief per borrower, executed on Day 1 of his presidency.

More than 200 organizations — including the American Federation of Teachers, the N.A.A.C.P. and others that were integral to his campaign — have joined the push.

The Education Department is effectively the country's largest consumer bank and the primary lender, since 2010, for higher education. It owns student loans totaling \$1.4 trillion, so forgiveness of some of that debt would be a rapid injection of cash into the pockets of many people suffering from the economic effects of the pandemic.

"There are a lot of people who came out to vote in this election who frankly did it as their last shot at seeing whether the government can really work for them," said Representative Pramila Jayapal, Democrat of Washington and the chairwoman of the Congressional Progressive Caucus. "If we don't deliver quick relief, it's going to be very difficult to get

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Two More Biden Picks

The president-elect chose Su-

Record U.S. Deaths Create a Wave of Devastation

This article is by Sarah Mervosh, Giulio McDonnell Nieto del Rio and Neil MacFarquhar.

DALLAS — Lillian Blancas was a fighter, a proud daughter of immigrants, part of the first generation in her family to attend college and a lawyer in El Paso who was on the brink of fulfilling her dream of becoming a judge.

Instead, Ms. Blancas, 47, died alone in her hospital room this week, just before a runoff election on Saturday in which she was the favorite, becoming part of a grim cascade of Americans who have died from the coronavirus as it rages out of control. More than 3,000 deaths were reported on Wednesday for the first time since the pandemic began.

"We're completely devastated. Heartbroken. We can't find a reason," said her sister, Gabriela Tie-

Daily Toll Tops 3,000, but Experts Warn Worst Is to Come

mann, who recalled staring through the glass doors of Ms. Blancas's hospital room, wishing that she could stroke her hair one last time.

The new daily death record — 3,055 individuals who blew out birthday candles, made mistakes, laughed and cried before succumbing to the virus — far surpassed the spring peak of 2,752 deaths on April 15 and amounted to a stunning embodiment of the pandemic's toll. In a single day, the country, numbed and divided, lost more Americans to the coronavirus than were killed in the Sept. 11

terror attacks or the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Catherine Troisi, an infectious-disease epidemiologist at the UTHealth School of Public Health in Houston, said she had cried watching the faces of coronavirus victims on "PBS NewsHour" and expected the death toll to accelerate, in part because current numbers likely do not reflect infections from Thanksgiving gatherings.

"The worst is yet to come in the next week or two or three," she said. "What happens after that is going to depend on our behavior today."

The most recent deaths come as the country is recording more new cases and hospitalizations than ever before. More than 290,000 people have died in the United States during the pandemic.

With a current average of more than 2,200 deaths per day, Continued on Page A8



ADAM ALTMAN/AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

PFIZER'S VACCINE CLEARS A BIG STEP TOWARD APPROVAL

F.D.A. Authorization Is Expected Soon,
as Caseloads Continue to Soar

This article is by Katie Thomas, Noah Welland and Sharon LaFraniere.

Pfizer's Covid-19 vaccine passed a critical milestone on Thursday when a panel of experts formally recommended that the Food and Drug Administration authorize the vaccine. The agency is likely to do so within days, giving health care workers and nursing home residents first priority to begin receiving the first shots early next week.

The F.D.A.'s vaccine advisory panel, composed of independent scientific experts, infectious disease doctors and statisticians, voted 17 to 4, with one member abstaining, in favor of emergency authorization for people 16 and older. With rare exceptions, the F.D.A. follows the advice of its advisory panels.

With this formal blessing, the nation may finally begin to slow the spread of the virus just as infections and deaths surge, reaching a record of more than 3,000 daily deaths on Wednesday. The F.D.A. is expected to grant an emergency use authorization on Saturday, according to people familiar with the agency's planning, though they cautioned that last-minute legal or bureaucratic re-

quirements could push the announcement to Sunday or later.

The initial shipment of 6.4 million doses will leave warehouses within 24 hours of being cleared by the F.D.A., according to federal officials. About half of those doses will be sent across the country, and the other half will be reserved for the initial recipients to receive their second dose about three weeks later.

The arrival of the first vaccines is the beginning of a complex, monthlong distribution plan coordinated by federal and local health authorities, as well as large hospitals and pharmacy chains, that if successful, will help return a grieving and economically depressed country back to some semblance of normal, maybe by summer.

"With the high efficacy and good safety profile shown for our vaccine, and the pandemic essentially out of control, vaccine introduction is an urgent need," Kathrin Jansen, a senior vice president and the head of vaccine research and development at Pfizer, said at the meeting.

The vote caps a whirlwind year for Pfizer and its German partner for Pfizer and its German partner Continued on Page A8

As Oil Demand Declines, Exxon Is at Crossroads

By CLIFFORD KRAUSS

HOUSTON — Over the last 135 years, Exxon Mobil has survived hostile governments, ill-fated investments and the catastrophic Exxon Valdez oil spill. Through it all, the oil company made bundles of money.

But suddenly Exxon is slipping badly, its long latent vulnerabilities exposed by the coronavirus pandemic and technological shifts that promise to transform the energy world because of growing concerns about climate change.

The company, for decades one of the most profitable and valuable American businesses, lost \$2.4 billion in the first nine months of the year, and its share price is down about 35 percent this year. In August, Exxon was tossed out of the Dow Jones industrial average, replaced by Salesforce, a software company. The change symbolized the passing of the baton from Big Oil to an increasingly dominant technology industry.

"Is Exxon a survivor?" asked Jennifer Rowland, an energy analyst at Edward Jones. "Of course they are, with great global assets, great people, great technical know-how. But the question really is, can they thrive? There is a lot of skepticism about that right now."

Exxon is under growing pressure from investors. D.E. Shaw, a longtime shareholder that recently increased its stake in Exxon, is demanding that the company cut costs and improve its environmental record, according to a person briefed on the matter. Another activist investor, Engine No. 1, is pushing for similar changes in an effort backed by the California State Teachers Retirement System and the Church of England. And on Wednesday, the New York State comptroller, Thomas P. DiNapoli, said the state's \$226 billion pension fund would sell shares in oil and gas companies that did not move fast enough to reduce emissions.

Of course, every oil company is struggling with the collapse in en-



A shuttered business in Midtown, where offices lay vacant.

Hard Questions For a Midtown Left Withering

By MATTHEW HAAG
and DANA RUBINSTEIN

The pandemic is pummeling New York City's commercial real estate industry, one of its main economic engines, threatening the future of the nation's largest business districts as well as the city's finances.

The damage caused by the emptying of office towers and the permanent closure of many stores is far more significant than many experts had predicted early in the crisis.

The powerful real estate industry is so concerned that the shifts in workplace culture caused by the outbreak will become long-lasting that it is promoting a striking proposal: to turn more than one million square feet of Manhattan office space into housing.

Nearly 14 percent of office space in Midtown Manhattan is vacant, the highest rate since 2009. On Madison Avenue in Midtown, one of the most affluent retail stretches in the country, more than a third of all storefronts are empty, double the rate from five years ago.

The collapse of commercial real estate is another major burden for New York, since the industry provides a significant portion of the city's tax revenues.

Filings to erect new buildings in the city, a key indicator of industry

Tracking an Outbreak New York City

A DISTRICT TRANSFORMED

A Midtown Left Reeling Considers Converting Offices Into Apartments

From Page A1

confidence, have dropped 22 percent this year to 1,187, the lowest number since 2010.

As of late October, only 10 percent of Manhattan's one million office workers were reporting to the office, according to a survey by the Partnership for New York City, an influential business group.

And this already bleak picture could even get worse, real estate experts and industry executives said.

"It would probably be fair to say we haven't hit bottom yet," said James Whelan, president of the Real Estate Board of New York.

It does not appear that the major commercial landlords in the city are facing financial collapse, but the stocks of the ones that are publicly traded are down sharply since March.

The fallout from the crisis can be seen in a rising tide of litigation between landlords and tenants, even at some of New York's most gilded addresses.

At the Shops at Columbus Circle, a luxury mall overlooking Central Park, the developer has accused a group of high-end retailers, including Michael Kors and Hugo Boss, of skipping out on more than \$7 million in rent and fees. On Fifth Avenue, the Italian designer Valentino has sued its landlord to free itself from a lease of nearly \$1.6 million per month.

New York City's finances — money to pick up trash, repair parks and police streets — rely on the health of the industry.

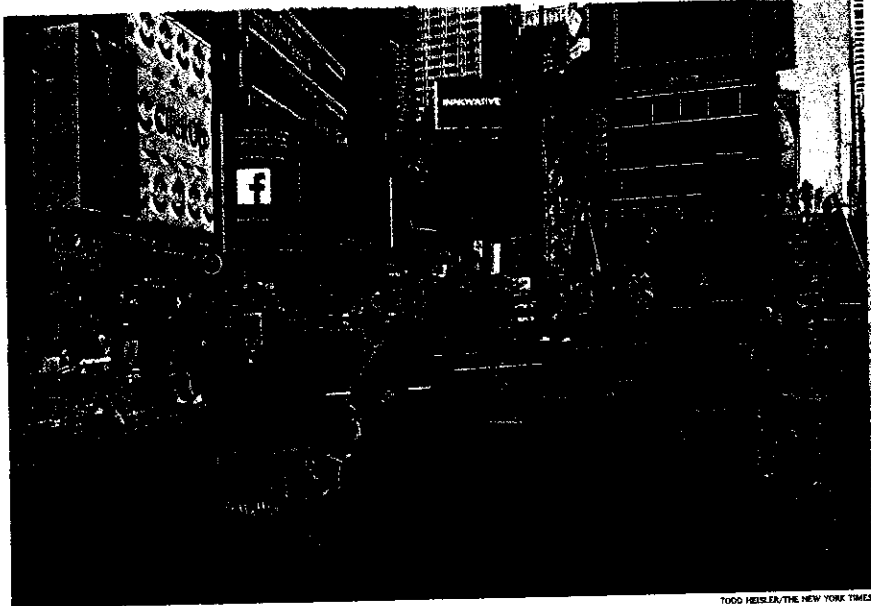
Property taxes represent the largest source of city revenue, and commercial property accounts for the largest share of that overall levy, 41 percent, according to Thomas P. DiNapoli, the state comptroller.

Commercial property sales have plummeted by nearly 50 percent through October, according to Rahul Jain, a deputy state comptroller.

A weakened commercial real estate market will make it "much harder for businesses and the economy to get back to normal," Mr. DiNapoli said.

The lack of workers is having a ripple effect on rents. Across Manhattan's retail corridors, asking commercial rents have dropped nearly 13 percent from last year, according to CBRE, a commercial real estate firm. The steepest declines are in areas dominated by office buildings, including Times Square and Grand Central Terminal, and shopping destinations like SoHo.

The industry's troubles, initially sparked by the exodus of office workers during the state's stay-at-home orders in the spring, have persisted as many commuters



Just 10 percent of Manhattan's one million office workers are reporting to the office. Rents in Times Square have declined steeply.

have settled into long-term or permanent remote-work arrangements. Tourists have also largely disappeared.

As a result, tensions are growing between the city's powerful landlords and some of their equally powerful tenants. Property owners have accused blue-chip companies of using the pandemic to withhold rent they can afford, while tenants have portrayed landlords as greedy and unwilling to acknowledge economic reality.

"It's not easy, but we need to make sacrifices, and landlords need to make sacrifices," said Lawrence Berger, chairman of Fanzlids Holdings, which owns Lids, an athletic headwear store whose flagship shop is in Times Square.

The shop has been sued over more than \$511,000 in unpaid rent and charges at four other Manhattan stores that were closed for months at a time.

"The amazing thing to us is that in New York, they're going after rent for times when we weren't allowed to be open," Mr. Berger said. "We have worked out deals with our landlords across the country except in New York City."

Landlords like Related, which owns the Shops at Columbus Circle and has sued five of its tenants

say, they have their own financial obligations and tenants that can afford rent should pay.

The litigation does not capture the behind-the-scenes, high-stakes negotiations that have led to resolutions without resorting to court, said William H. Mack, a commercial lawyer at the firm Davidoff Hatcher & Citron in New York.

Mr. Mack has been hired by Hugo Boss in its effort to reduce or void its lease at Columbus Circle. "This is 80 to 90 percent of what I've been doing since March and April," he said.

At the Real Estate Board of New York, whose members include nearly every major landlord and developer in New York, the prospect of systemic changes in work habits looms large.

"Anyone that thinks the way that people used the workplace in the past isn't going to change post-pandemic is fooling themselves," said Scott Rechler, chair of the Regional Plan Association and the chief executive of RYR Realty, which controls 26 million square feet of city office space.

Employers have discovered that productivity does not necessarily suffer in the absence of shared work space and that smaller office footprints and more lenient work-from-home policies

might make lasting economic sense.

As a result, the landlord group is proposing that the city and state allow developers to more easily convert Manhattan and borough offices into residences.

Roughly 140 million of Manhattan's 400 million square feet of office space is considered to be of average quality or is in older and less luxurious buildings, according to Cushman and Wakefield, a real estate brokerage. The real estate board puts the citywide supply of those buildings at roughly 210 million square feet.

The real estate group estimates that converting even just 10 percent of that office space to residential would create 14,000 apartments citywide, including as many as 10,000 in Manhattan — a significant amount in a city routinely short of enough housing, especially affordable homes.

Changes to zoning rules needed for any conversions would require that some portion of new housing be set aside as affordable, the board said.

Mark A. Willis, a senior policy fellow at New York University's Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, said that before the pandemic, job growth was outpacing housing growth in the city, causing demand to far outstrip

supply and exacerbating the city's persistent housing shortage.

"Facilitating the reuse of buildings to adapt to changes in the economy is, to me, a very smart idea," Mr. Willis said.

Some tenants are using the current downturn — and the resulting lower prices per square foot — to trade up for nicer office space, the board said. That is a boon for higher-end office landlords, but could bode ill for landlords of lower-rated buildings.

Converting office buildings to homes would not only provide a potential financial lifeline to landlords, but would also benefit retailers, the real estate board argues, because the presence of office users during the day and apartment dwellers at night would increase foot traffic.

There is no reason, they argue, for Midtown to retain its status as New York's last predominantly office district, bustling during the day but quieter at night.

They cite the success of Lower Manhattan, which in recent decades has turned from an almost exclusively office district into a vibrant residential neighborhood.

The proposal would require changes to zoning and density rules that would have to be approved by the City Council and the State Legislature and embraced

by the mayor and governor.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's office would say only that he would review the idea.

A spokesman for Mayor Bill de Blasio, who is term-limited and about to begin his last year in office, welcomed the housing proposal.

"City Hall is always looking for sensible, equitable ways to deliver more housing," said the spokesman, Bill Neidhardt.

Still, converting office space to apartments is not easy. Landlords would still need to wait for buildings to empty, which can take years.

The landlord group says the city and state should help expedite conversions by lifting zoning restrictions that require manufacturing in areas like the garment district, changing density requirements that bar apartments and creating new tax breaks for landlords.

Whether city and state elected officials will green-light a measure that would help real estate developers when so many tenants are struggling is an open question.

Several candidates vying to succeed Mr. de Blasio have vowed to refuse campaign donations from real estate developers.

Nor is it clear how many landlords would actually take advantage of the proposed changes.

Jeff Gural, who controls a large portfolio of aging buildings in Manhattan, said he would rather remain in his current line of work.

"We don't have that much vacant space to begin with," Mr. Gural said. "And I believe there will be a demand for the kind of space that we have."

Another possible source for expanding housing would be to convert hotels, many of which have closed as the industry has been decimated by a plunge in tourism and business travel.

That idea is gaining traction among some developers and affordable housing advocates. One group that is trying to shape the 2021 mayoral debate, United for Housing, will argue in an upcoming report that the next mayor should prioritize converting hotels into permanent supportive and affordable housing.

As for the real estate board's proposal, some housing advocates say the pandemic is an opportunity to get creative about easing the city's housing crisis.

"We need a comprehensive plan for how to bring on new housing resources, and the idea of converting office buildings to residential I think has a lot of upside," said Brenda Rosen, the president and chief executive of E. Breckinridge Group, which describes itself as the state's largest provider of supportive housing.

INCREASING ROBBERIES

City Lifeline Comes Under Threat As Crime Sweeps Through Bodegas

By EDGAR SANDOVAL

It was shortly after 6 o'clock one night in late October when Hardik Parekh, the manager of a corner store in Queens, saw a man he recognized as a chronic shoplifter walk in. Not again, he thought.

Mr. Parekh shared a glance with a co-worker, Mohamediyar Tarwala, 26, who quickly moved to escort the man out the door. The mundane moment then took a terrifying turn. The man pulled out a firearm and fatally shot Mr. Tarwala, Mr. Parekh said.

"Later, after the pandemic, I don't know why, but we had people come in and threatening us," Mr. Parekh said, standing near the spot where his friend collapsed. "I never thought it would end up in

ple have been killed in or just outside the stores, according to the data.

The surge comes as a second wave of the virus hits the city and a steep rise in gun violence that plagued New Yorkers over the summer shows no signs of slowing down. Shootings have doubled this year over last, and murders are up nearly 40 percent.

Fernando Mateo, one of the founders of the United Bodegas of America, an organization that represents about 20,000 bodegas in New York, said the pandemic had provided cover for a small number of criminals to target neigh-

cameras captured the gruesome scene as the gang members stabbed him to death.

Since then, a handful of bodega owners have added safety measures, such as panic buttons, brighter lights and special locks. But Mr. Mateo said the majority of bodega operators cannot afford the added security, which can cost thousands of dollars.

Until recently, Mr. Parekh was one of them. He said he finally invested in a panic button and is adding bright lights at his store, Crossbay Express.

For months he said he looked the other way when he noticed people sneaking out of his shop without paying for items like ice cream, beer or canned goods, be-



Spinelli. "It can quickly escalate. Our advice is to call 911 instead."

On a chilly day in mid-November, the officers made their round in the 44th Precinct, where bodegas, some adorned with colorful street murals, could be seen on a most every street block. The first stop was at a Pioneer Supermarket, a larger than average corner store, where the owner, De Morel, 55, welcomed them with a smile.

Mr. Morel told the officers man he recognized as a regular customer had walked out of the store a recent day without paying for sausages. A store manager had not stopped the man, but I stead gave a surveillance video the police, he said.

"I don't let nothing slide," Mr. Morel said. "You steal at my store I want you arrested."

Rita Clark, a longtime customer said she relied on the store for necessities throughout the pandemic. "This young lady is he 24/7," Mr. Morel said, gesturing Ms. Clark with a giggle. "A customers are like my family."