

Reimagining East County, South Bay Downtowns

CONSULTING: New City America Progressing in Chula Vista, El Cajon

■ By DANIEL PEARSON

CHULA VISTA & EL CAJON – Downtown Chula Vista and downtown El Cajon are receiving major facelifts.

New City America recently expanded its neighborhood revitalization efforts in the two cities by bringing in new businesses, creating event spaces, and landscaping.

“New City America works in the strategic locations it does because we believe very strongly in the neighborhoods we currently work in, and we think that there’s a lot of promise and potential,” said **Marco Li Mandri**, CEO of First City America.

Forming a New District

New City America focuses on district formation, strategic consulting, and hands-on management of public spaces. The company was formed in 1995 as Li Mandri began revitalizing the Little Italy neighborhood of San Diego.

New City’s latest business district – the company’s 102nd in the U.S. – is for the **City of El Cajon’s** downtown, joining five other districts in San Diego. New City has nine districts in the state, including three in Los Angeles and one in the Bay Area. The firm also manages districts throughout the U.S.

New City begins each new neighborhood project by either starting a new district or reforming a current one.

The majority of district improvement efforts are then generated from a city’s response

➔ *New City America page 33*



Marco Li Mandri, right, and Dominic Li Mandri walk through downtown Chula Vista, one of 102 districts that they have helped revitalize. Photo by Daniel Pearson

SIGNED, SEALED, DELIVERED

LOGISTICS: Annex Brands Inc. Adds 36 Locations with Postal Connections Acquisition

■ By MADISON GEERING

SAN DIEGO – Annex Brands Inc. is a place where people come to stay. Twenty years is the average tenure of its executive team.

A commitment to the company’s people and spirit for small business is what makes a brand with over 800 licensed and franchised locations still feel personal, CEO **Patrick Edd** said. He has been at the packing, shipping and business service center for over 35 years himself.

➔ *Annex Brands page 32*



Annex Brands Inc. CEO Patrick Edd at the company’s headquarters in San Diego. Photo by Madison Geering

Axiom Bio Pursuing IPO in Hong Kong

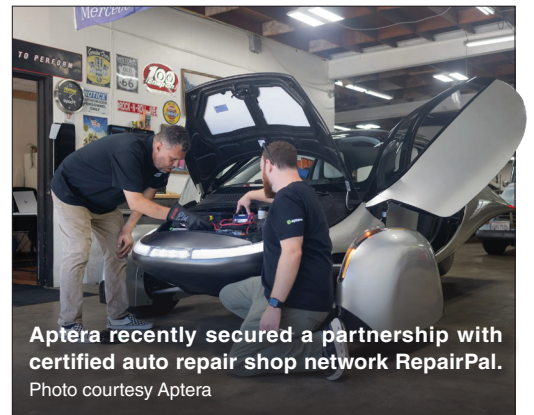
BIOTECH: Pipeline Centered on Umbilical Cord-derived Stem Cells

■ By ELI WALSH

CARLSBAD – Axiom Biosciences is not limiting its opportunities.

“If you could deliver one molecule to, let’s say, one tumor or one organ or one tissue type, and repeatedly show that you could do that,” Axiom

➔ *Axiom Biosciences page 35*



Aptera recently secured a partnership with certified auto repair shop network RepairPal. Photo courtesy Aptera

Aptera Closing in On Start of Production

EVs: Customers Could Receive Solar Vehicles in Early ‘27

■ By ELI WALSH

CARLSBAD – Aptera Motors Corp. (Nasdaq: SEV) is rounding the final corner and approaching the finish line.

The three-wheeled solar electric vehicle company has produced more than half a dozen validation vehicles at its Carlsbad manufacturing facility and is in the process of procuring the bodies,

➔ *Aptera Motors page 34*

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Outside The Lens Creates Space Where Youth Want to Be



Sarah Beckman, executive director of Outside The Lens, confers with Marcie Fausto, lead teacher and design associate. Photo courtesy of Outside The Lens

NONPROFITS: Youth Group Finds a New Downtown Home

■ By RAY HUARD

SAN DIEGO – Outside The Lens, a youth media arts nonprofit, is moving its headquarters from the Wonder Bread building in East Village to 925 B St. downtown.

The move was required when the Wonder Bread building was sold in June to **Live Nation**, which plans to redevelop the property into an entertainment venue.

Outside The Lens signed a seven-year lease on 11,987 square feet on the fifth floor of 925 B St. to replace the 10,689-square-foot suite of office that it had leased in the Wonder Bread Building.

“It’s bittersweet to say goodbye to our ‘Wonder Lab’ but change is always an opportunity for reinventions and new opportunities,” said Executive Director **Sarah Beckman**. “We’re celebrating 25 years of youth storytelling, and this move offers a space that matches the scale and energy of what our students and staff are creating.”

Outside The Lens serves more than 2,700 youths annually – school students in kindergarten through high school and those aged 18 to 24, who are making the transition out of foster care. The nonprofit also works with young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

“The populations that we serve are students that are systematically marginalized or are navigating a lack of opportunity in their lives. They may be teen parents. They may be un-

➔ *Outside The Lens page 37*

Mankind Puts Focus on Alternative to Large, Pricy Housing Projects

REAL ESTATE: \$5M Akino Living Opening in ‘Underserved’ Encanto

■ By RAY HUARD

ENCANTO – Mankind Investment Group has completed the first four rental apartment complexes at **Akino Living**, a \$5 million planned 20-apartment community at 6170 Akino Ave. in Encanto.

“We really like Encanto,” said **Jake Risman**, a general partner at Mankind Investment Group.

“It’s an underserved community with a lot of good people. I don’t see a lot of housing that’s available,” Risman said. “It’s underdeveloped.”

With **Yardhouse** as the general contractor, the project will have 10 duplexes.

Akino Living is meant to be an alternative to the large, pricey projects that Risman said have accounted for much of the new development in San Diego County, aside from affordable projects that use tax credits and other government financing and are earmarked for low-income tenants.

“People are building these big, giant buildings,” Risman said. “There aren’t a lot of these garden-style buildings.”

Mankind Investment Group was founded in 2024 by Risman and his business partner, **Steven Maman**, who is the firm’s general partner with Risman.

They created Mankind Investment Group to build smaller apartment complexes of two to 30 units after successfully starting and running several companies.

Most of their projects are south of Interstate 8.

“What we’re ultimately trying to do, and we think we’re good at, is giving people some rent-



Jake Risman, general partner of Mankind Investment Group, focuses on building workforce housing. Photo courtesy of Mankind Investment Group

al relief in these condo-type spaces,” Risman said. “There’s not a lot of competition for this type of housing.”

Many new housing projects that have been built recently have 200 or more apartments.

“Some people don’t want that. They can’t afford a house, but they want to live in something that feels like theirs,” Risman said.

Long-term Investment

The 12,500-square-foot site of Akino Living had a 600-square-foot single-family home on it that was razed to make way for Akino Living’s duplexes.

“Our target is the people who live in Encanto already,” Risman said, adding that “Encanto is more of a working class neighborhood.”

“We have a lot of people that are dry-wallers, painters – those kind of guys,” Risman said.

Akino Living will have a mix of one-bedroom, two-bedroom and three-bedroom apartments.

Three-bedroom apartments were included in the mix because, “There’s not a lot available for families,” Risman said.

Monthly rents range from \$2,100 to \$3,950, according to Akino Living’s website.

The three-story buildings in Akino Living will have “a contemporary design,” with flats on the ground floor and two-story apartments above them.

All of the units have balconies, private entrances and washers and dryers.

“We don’t believe in shared laundries,” Risman said. “I don’t understand the shared laundry concept. It’s to save money, but at the end of the day, a few thousand to give people their own laundry is a needed amenity.”

The facades will be a mix of stucco and wood paneling.

➔ *Akino Living page 36*

Outside The Lens

from page 8

housed,” Beckman said. “We do a lot of work with juvenile court and community schools.” Since it was founded in 2001 by **Elisa Thomsom**, Outside The Lens has helped nearly 30,000 youths. “Our biggest opportunity, and what’s really needed, is to bridge the understanding between the youth and their communities and how people are seeing what youth are going through right now,” Beckman said. “We’re always working on relationships in the community for referrals.” The nonprofit offers meals, transportation and a creative outlet for coping with challenges through the arts, according to Beckman. “We’re always asking the question, and we’re engaging youth in our civic discussion of, ‘How can we make San Diego somewhere youth want to be? How can we make San Diego somewhere for young people to build a future?’” Beckman said.

Staying Downtown

The new space comes at a higher price, with an annual base rent of \$258,919, compared to \$153,924 that Outside The Lens was paying at the Wonder Bread building. Outside The Lens also spent more than \$250,000 in tenant improvements at 925 B St., according to Beckman. They included adding a secondary media lab, a conference room and an open kitchen. “Young people from across San Diego County come to Outside The Lens for community, creativity, and safety, many of whom are navigating real barriers to opportunity,” Beckman said. “We always want students to feel welcomed, inspired, and seen. Our new home at 925 B St. supports that intention.” With **Derek Hulse** of **Cushman & Wakefield**, Outside The Lens evaluated 100 poten-



Outside The Lens is renovating the fifth floor of 925 B St. as its new home. Photo courtesy of Outside The Lens

tial sites over 10 months before settling on 925 B St., according to Beckman. Staying downtown was a deciding factor, Beckman said, and the 925 B St. location also will connect Outside The Lens with the revitalization of the nearby Civic Center and **City College**. The new location also allows Outside The Lens to have all of its programs and staff on one floor. “This new space allows us to be in the same continuous space, which allows for more creative collaboration, more flexible use, and is a better fit in the community for our team,”

Beckman said. “It’s got an entire wall of windows looking east, then there’s a bank of windows looking north toward Balboa Park. It feels a bit like a creative studio vibe.” A terrace also provides “a little bit of outdoor space for folks to get a little fresh air, which is really helpful,” Beckman said, and movable interior walls add to the flexibility of the office.■

SDBJ EXTRA:

Scan to see enhanced coverage of Outside The Lens



Outside The Lens



FOUNDED: 2001
HEADQUARTERS: Downtown San Diego
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: Sarah Beckman
EMPLOYEES: 25
BUSINESS: Youth media arts education nonprofit
WEBSITE: www.outsidethelens.org
CONTACT: 858-349-7578; info@outsidethelens.org
NOTABLE: Outside The Lens has brought arts-integrated programming to more than 30,000 students across San Diego County through in-school classes, after-school programs, summer camps, workshops and teacher training.

Aizen Therapeutics

from page 6

chem and manufacturing,” he said. “They’re going to learn from us on the AI side and what are the latest tools and how do you use these in a practical way.”

Pursuing Mirror Peptides

Peptides are chains of amino acids, which are the building blocks of proteins, and serve a variety of functions in the body like hormone regulation, tissue repair and growth, immune defense and inflammation mitigation. Insulin, endorphins and growth hormone are all peptides produced by the human body, but peptides can also be found in some proteins and synthesized in laboratory settings. Aizen originally spun out of the **California Institute of Technology** using technology developed by professor **Dr. David Van Valen** to specifically focus on leveraging mirror peptides for therapeutic drugs. Mirror peptides are comprised of D-amino acids and their structures are mirror forms of naturally occurring proteins and peptides, which are comprised of L-amino acids. However, the body does not recognize or react to mirror peptides the way it does to L-amino acid peptides, allowing them to avoid an immune system response that would otherwise break them down. Kshatriya argued that could mean the body is unable to build up an immunogenic tolerance to certain peptide-based drugs that patients would take over long periods of time or for the remainder of their life. He noted that **Johnson & Johnson** is currently leading the way in peptide drugs with Icotyde, the first and currently only oral peptide drug approved by the **U.S. Food and Drug Administration**. Icotyde treats moderate-to-se-

vere plaque psoriasis by blocking the interleukin-23 receptor, preventing the body from triggering a disproportionate immune response. “A lot of these autoimmune diseases, you try to suppress that, but then you end up having the body come back over the top of it with the immunogenic response,” Kshatriya said. “Will these non-natural amino acids have a reduced immune response? That’s something we’re watching pretty closely.”

DaX Discovery Platform

According to Kshatriya, Aizen has devel-

oped its D-amino acid explorer (DaX) drug discovery platform as a general-purpose AI tool to design peptides de novo, a challenge he argued the industry has yet to solve. The company initially sought to validate the DaX platform with publicly available data as it came out of stealth, but has since developed its own proprietary dataset to train its drug discovery models that Kshatriya argued has repeatedly produced novel chemical designs. “The current wet lab methods and the current tech methods are very specific to an individual subset of the overall peptide universe,”



Ajay Kshatriya is the founder and CEO of peptide drug discovery and development startup Aizen Therapeutics. Photo courtesy Aizen

he said. “So what we’ve solved is that AI system to do that whole thing.” With the partnership secured, Aizen is now setting its sights on a Series A funding round that Kshatriya estimated could be closed by the first quarter of 2027. The company is also setting a goal to build out its portfolio with at least three drug applications and be ready to go public by 2030. Kshatriya compared Aizen to starting his career at the Bay Area-based biotechnology company **Genentech**, which was acquired by **Roche** in 2009. “It was just the most beautiful expression of science-based innovation where you’re advancing fundamental research, saving patients’ lives and making a living,” he said. “And it was such a fun place to be when it was an independent company, just the frontier of science; I want to build the next one, and I want to do it here in San Diego.”■

SDBJ EXTRA:

Scan to see enhanced coverage of Aizen Therapeutics



Aizen Therapeutics



FOUNDED: 2022
CEO: Ajay Kshatriya
HEADQUARTERS: San Diego
BUSINESS: AI-driven peptide drug discovery and development
EMPLOYEES: ~12
FUNDING: \$13 million
WEBSITE: aizentx.com
CONTACT: info@aizentx.com
NOTABLE: Kshatriya is the founder of genomics diagnostic company Biota, which he sold to Danish global biotechnology company Novozymes, now known as Novonosis, in 2021.