

# FTC sues to block grocery merger

Kroger's \$24.6-billion proposed buyout of Albertsons would raise prices and hurt workers, agency says.

By SUHAUNA HUSSAIN

The Federal Trade Commission said it is suing to block supermarket giant Kroger's bid to buy its smaller rival Albertsons because the combination would obliterate competition between the major grocers, leading to higher prices and lower-quality products for millions of Americans.

The regulatory agency said Monday that it authorized filing of a federal lawsuit that also alleges Kroger's proposed \$24.6-billion acquisition of Albertsons — the largest proposed supermarket merger in United States history — would hurt workers, eliminating their ability to negotiate for higher wages and better benefits.

The deal, announced in October 2022, would bring together Kroger's collection of supermarkets, including the Ralphs chain, and Albertsons' roster, including Vons and Safeway. The two chains have said they need to combine to better compete with retail giant Walmart and other grocery sellers.

The proposed merger comes during a prolonged rise in the prices consumers pay at grocery stores and restaurants. From 2019 through 2023, food costs rose 25% compared with the overall 19.2% increase in the consumer price index.

"This supermarket mega merger comes as American consumers have seen the cost of groceries rise steadily over the past few years," said Henry Liu, director of the FTC's Bureau of Competition in a news release. "Es-

[See **Grocers**, A5]



GARY CORONADO Los Angeles Times

**DR. ALICE KUO**, a pediatrician and health professor at UCLA, examines 4-year-old JoJo during his well-child visit in Santa Monica.

# Babies missing out on doctor visits

Most California children rely on Medi-Cal for vital preventive care, but many are not getting health screenings and vaccinations because of difficulty accessing services

By JENNY GOLD

Maria Mercado's 5- and 7-year-old daughters haven't been to the doctor for a checkup in two years. And it's not for lack of trying.

Mercado, a factory worker in South Los Angeles, has called the pediatrician's office over and over hoping to book an appointment for a well-child visit, only to be told there are no appointments available and to call back in a month. Sometimes, she waits on hold for an hour. Like more than half of children in California, Mercado's daughters have Medi-Cal, the state's health insurance program for low-income residents.

Her children are two years behind on their vaccinations. Mercado isn't sure if they're growing well, and they haven't been screened for vision, hearing or developmental delays. Her older daughter has developed a stutter, and she worries the girl might need speech therapy.

"It is frustrating because as a mom, you want your kids to hit every



DANIA MAXWELL Los Angeles Times

**ALEXIA PERALTA** of Hawthorne spent months in limbo trying to get her son, Anthony, re-enrolled in Medi-Cal.

milestone," she said. "And if you see something's going on and they're not helping you, it's like, what am I supposed to do at this point?"

California — where 97% of children have health insurance — ranks 46th out of all 50 states and the District of Columbia for providing a preventive care visit for kids 5 and under, according to a 2022 federal government survey. A recent report card from Children Now, a nonprofit advocacy group, rated California a D on children's access to preventive care, despite the state's A-minus grade for ensuring that children have coverage.

The majority of California's youngest residents — including 14 million children ages 5 and under — rely on Medi-Cal, an infrastructure ill-equipped to serve them. The state has been criticized in two consecutive audits in the last five years for failing to hold Medi-Cal insurance plans accountable for providing the necessary preventive care to the children they are paid to cover.

In a written response to questions [See **Babies**, A7]

## POWER Y GLORY: LATINO POLITICS IN LOS ANGELES

# The Eastside, cradle of Latino politics, is squabbling again

GUSTAVO ARELLANO



Sipping on an iced cappuccino, Antonio Villaraigosa beamed as he described the pinnacle of his career.

His late-1990s stint as speaker of the California Assembly? Nah. Serving as the first Latino mayor of Los Angeles in 133 years? Important, but that wasn't it.

Continuing to advise political hopefuls across Los Angeles County? Nope.

No, what prompted Villaraigosa to happily reminisce for a good hour was his success as a peacemaker in the eternal civil war that's politics on the Eastside.

Rivalries are part of any region's politics, but in the cradle of Latino power in Los Angeles, they are [See **Arellano**, A10]



Los Angeles Times

**FORMER MAYOR** Antonio Villaraigosa says the pinnacle of his career was his role as Eastside political peacemaker.

# Migrant arrests rise in California while Texas sees decrease

The Lone Star State's policies appear to be driving a shift to other entry points along the southern U.S. border.

By ANDREA CASTILLO

WASHINGTON — A new pattern emerged along the nation's southern frontier last month: Migrant arrests plummeted at the Texas border in January compared with the same month a year ago. At the same time, similar arrests soared year-over-year at entry points in California and Arizona.

Experts say a combination of factors is probably causing the shift, which has led to several thousand migrants entering California each week while they await court dates for immigration proceedings.

Stepped-up enforcement efforts by the governments

of Mexico, Panama and Colombia and heightened cartel violence in Mexico, across the border from Texas, have probably slowed expected migration into that state.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's restrictive new immigration policies, including installing razor wire along some parts of the border and a new state law that could take effect next month, could also be playing a role.

"For something to change that much that quickly, it's either word of mouth among migrants or some change among smuggling patterns, or both," said Adam Isacson, director for defense oversight at the Washington Office on Latin America, a research and advocacy organization.

He said some migrants and smugglers may already be changing their routes in anticipation of the Texas law, which would authorize local police to charge migrants with illegal entry and [See **Migrants**, A5]

## Social media laws pose a conundrum

Supreme Court justices seem divided on whether Florida and Texas can regulate popular platforms. **PERSPECTIVES**, A2

## Helene Elliott calls it a career

After 47 years as sports-writer, the last 34-plus of those at The Times, the columnist is saying goodbye. **SPORTS**, B10

## Ensuring NASA's mission is a go

Steve Barajas is a JPL engineer for the Europa Clipper, which will look for an ocean on a Jupiter moon. **BUSINESS**, A6

## Weather

A morning shower.

L.A. Basin: 67/50. **B6**



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