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Daily Bread

Photo by Pablo Franceschi | Tico Times



Children and young, single mothers in a depressed area southeast of San José benefit from a program of the Feed My Sheep association that provides free lunches to some 100 hungry kids five days a week at the church of San Miguel de Desamparados. See story, Page 5.

NEWS

Environmentalists Sling Shots at Giant Hotel

The new, luxury Hotel Riu, in the northern Pacific province of Guanacaste, stands to lose land and structures if it loses in court. The mammoth hotel is facing charges of causing damage to the environment during construction.

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BUSINESS

C.R. Spreads Welcome Mat For Aging Baby Boomers

A new upscale Guanacaste community designed to attract retirees is moving from the drawing board to actual construction in May. The Pacific Plaza, which will include a hospital and assisted living facilities, is one of several such projects under consideration.

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WEEKEND

Santa Ana Church Sees Through a Glass, Colorfully

Thanks to Dutch-born psychiatrist and artist Pieter Kors, a restored church in Río Oro de Santa Ana boasts a beautiful series of spiritually themed stained-glass windows.

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CENTRAL AMERICA

Latin American Unification?



A proposal to form a new Latin American body without the U.S. or Canada is sparking a range of reactions in the hemisphere.

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Transit Law Stalled

By Chrissie Long
Tico Times Staff

Steep fines for traffic violations likely will go into effect on Monday without the reductions legislators had hoped to apply.

The fines, which climb as high as \$415 for attempting to bribe an officer and \$300 for talking on a cell phone while driving, were first included in the law in November 2008 as a means to help deter reckless and drunk driving.

But as September 2009 approached – when the fines were to go into effect – legislators began to question whether they were excessive. They agreed to delay the law's effective date until March 2010 to allow themselves more time to review the sanctions and a handful of other inconsistencies in the law.

"Today, the parties who proposed all of this are looking for an exit," said Luis Antonio Barrantes, legislator for the Libertarian Movement Party. "We've said

from the beginning that the fines and sanctions were disproportionate and it included unnecessary requirements, such as first aid kits."

Speaking on the floor of the Legislative Assembly early last week, independent legislator Andrea Marcela Morales said, "This is the hour to vindicate these mistakes, to give the Costa Rican people a better quality law,

Chinese Envoy Talks Trade

By Adam Williams
Tico Times Staff

Li Changhua, the new Chinese ambassador to Costa Rica, assumes his new post at a time when the relationship between the two countries is both young and surging.

Since Costa Rica and China established diplomatic relations on June 1, 2007, cooperation between the two countries has advanced at hurricane-force speed – from construc-

tion of the gigantic National Stadium in San José's La Sabana Park, a gift of the Chinese government, to the recent negotiations for a free-trade agreement.

Changhua – who replaced the first-ever Chinese ambassador to Costa Rica, Wang Xiaoyuan, in January – has extensive Latin American experience. Most recently he served as Chinese ambassador to Colombia. Earlier, he was China's ambassador to Chile, and he

traffic legislation that is the law not lenient, but also doesn't smother people."

Some factions wanted to lower the blood alcohol level for drunk drivers. Others looked to take out the requirement of a psychological

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Community Kitchen Stirs Hope

By Mike McDonald

Tico Times Staff

The day began at PriceSmart in Zapote, a district in southeastern San José.

Mitch Zychowski, 59, from Pennsylvania, in the United States, entered the giant discount food store with his business partner.

At the entrance, the two met a Tico couple, Miguel Acosta and Alejandra Arguedas – a pastor and his wife from San Miguel de Desamparados, south of San José. The group grabbed two large platform carts and made their way up and down the aisles of the bulk goods store, grabbing bags and boxes of food.

“We need 30 bags of rice, the big ones,” Zychowski said to two young helpers. “Get a bunch of those beans, too. *Mucho, mucho!* This has to last for a while.”

When the crew finally reached the checkout counter, with food stacked beyond the handles of the five-foot-long metal pushcarts, the register rang up a total of more than \$2,000 worth of snacks, fruits, vegetables and staples, such as rice and beans, as well as many other goodies.

“It’s a lot of food, but that’s what it takes,” Acosta said as Zychowski handed a credit card to the cashier.

Zychowski visits Costa Rica every two months to make the trip to PriceSmart with Acosta and Arguedas. His association, Feed My Sheep, helped open a community kitchen in the church of San Miguel de Desamparados in November 2009.

The kitchen, run by Acosta and Arguedas while Zychowski is out of the country, provides lunch to 100 children five days a week in this small, dusty town. Some of the women in this shantytown are single mothers who don’t always have the time or the resources to meet all of their families’ needs.

They appreciate the new kitchen.

“It’s a big help,” said 24-year-old Maria Gómez, a mother of two. “I always cook in the house when I’m there, but having this for the kids helps me save a lot of time and a little bit of money.”

Some of Zychowski’s money is also used to purchase basic school and uniform sup-



Pablo Franceschi | Tico Times

Soul Food: Mitch Zychowski shares a moment with the beneficiaries of the church food kitchen he helps support while a line of hungry children forms for lunch.

plies for the families who are on the kitchen’s recipient list. On a recent Friday afternoon, each of the children present received a notebook, pens, pencils and a pair of new Crocs to wear around town.

Gomez’ neighbor, Yessis Vivas, 28, has one nine-year-old son. She called the kitchen “a blessing from God,” because she rarely has the cash to buy all the supplies that her son needs for each school semester.

Local families exalt the new *comedor*, or dining room, but the project hasn’t grown without some issues.

While Zychowski’s assistance can cover the costs for the food and some other basic items, the monies are not enough to pay the expenses that Acosta and Arguedas have faced since opening the dining hall’s doors late last year.

Electricity bills have soared because of all the cooking appliances the couple plugs in daily. Acosta’s gasoline payments have

increased due to the food runs they make to and from Zapote. The church is using more water than ever before.

The pair does not have the resources to food the bill on their own. Therefore, they are looking for aid outside of the community to keep the kitchen up and running.

Zychowski said he hopes to grow the new lunchroom so that it eventually can serve 150 children per day. At present, volunteers who help operate the kitchen have to turn children away at the entrance of the church because there is insufficient space and not enough food.

Francis Guillén, 23, volunteers at the church. She writes down and keeps track of the names of all the children who arrive everyday.

“It’s disheartening. There is nothing worse than telling a child that there is no space for him or her,” she said. “At the same



time, everything has to be organized and in order so that everyone can get what they need.”

To take advantage of the meals, families must sign up through Acosta and Arguedas and attend daily. After a three-day absence, children lose their spot on the list.

During a recent visit, 94 children arrived. Guillén breathed a sigh of relief.

But for Arguedas, providing lunch to 150 children is still a long way off.

In her office, sifting through bills and fighting back tears, she looked at her husband and asked him what to do.

“I don’t know if we can make it,” she said. “We need help. These families really need this *comedor*.”

For more information on Zychowski’s efforts, e-mail him at mitch@enjoycoupon-book.com. To help Acosta and Arguedas with the community kitchen, call the church’s office at 2510-2920. ■