

# Chicago Tribune



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## City paid baffling legal invoices

A 69-hour workday? Chicago didn't blink at impossible shifts

By Joe Mahr and Jason Meisner  
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

For one attorney's work over a 24-hour stretch, a law firm billed the city of Chicago for 69 hours.

In invoices submitted from another city-hired firm, one staffer was logged working more than 24 hours a day 15 times. For another staffer, at least seven times.

The city paid them all. Private law firms have submitted tens of thousands of invoices worth hundreds of millions of dollars to the city over the past decade for work to defend federal civil rights lawsuits related to police misconduct. In 2025 alone, the city paid these firms more than \$20 million to fight the claims of people whose criminal convictions were overturned in court.

These invoices — hours logged, money paid — represent one of the only available avenues to evaluate how well the Chicago Department of Law is vetting massive bills for which taxpayers ultimately are on the hook.

When the Tribune obtained and analyzed a decade's worth of these bills, it found the city failed to catch at least 40 instances when a firm billed Chicagoans for a person alleged to have worked more than 24 hours in a day.

Beyond those impossibilities, the analysis found that when the city's system flags a billing entry for extra scrutiny because someone worked more than 10 hours in a day, a potential sign of overbilling, the city routinely still pays.

These findings come after a Tribune investigation detailed how

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## SERVING UP FOOD — AND SOME MISHAPS

By Talia Soglin  
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Food delivery robots are now ubiquitous in parts of Chicago, cruising down crowded sidewalks and scooting themselves through crosswalks. But sometimes the robots get themselves into pickles as they deliver tuna sandwiches and other fare to the city's human denizens.

The lunch boxes on wheels have tumbled down subway stairs, crashed through bus shelters and even, in one case, learned to say "sorry."

The sidewalk bots, operated by Serve and Coco Robotics, both California-based companies, have cruised thousands of Windy City miles without significant incident in recent months.

But there have been some significant episodes — such as one case this year in which a robot collided

Sidewalk robots have tumbled down subway stairs, crashed through bus shelters and even learned to say 'sorry'

**Above:** A food delivery robot from Serve Robotics parks along West Grand Avenue on Tuesday in Chicago's West Town neighborhood near where a food delivery robot previously crashed through a bus shelter glass.  
**BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

head-on with a Divvy biker in Lakeview.

Some incidents, like the bus shelter crashes, have become flashpoints in an ongoing debate: In a city where advocates have long argued that pedestrians are sidelined by cars on the city's public way, should those pedestrians have to cede the sidewalk to robots?

"I take it on good faith that both companies know that they have a very low margin for error and tolerance from the public for things like this," said Ald. Brian Hopkins, in whose 2nd Ward a Coco delivery robot collided with a city bus shelter March 24, leaving glass shards strewn across the sidewalk.

The robots are on trial as the companies operate under a pilot program that expires in May 2027. Chicago's City Council would need to take action to allow the robots to stay in Chicago after

See **ROBOTS** on Page A8

### ELECTION 2026

## Bailey seeks distance from Trump

But MAGA shadow still looms over Republican gubernatorial candidate

By Rick Pearson  
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

After Darren Bailey last month won the Illinois Republican Party nomination for governor, he quickly tried to separate himself from President Donald Trump, declaring, "I am my own person" and that "there will be no outside influence dictating anything that we do here in Illinois."

Yet less than two weeks later, there was Bailey, sitting across from Trump's daughter-in-law Lara Trump inside Chicago's Trump International Hotel & Tower. In an interview for her Fox News show, Bailey urged the president's U.S. Justice Department or the FBI to come to Illinois to investigate "waste and fraud at massive levels" without offering any proof.



Republican gubernatorial candidate Darren Bailey speaks to the media after his primary victory at an Illinois GOP unity breakfast in Naperville on March 18. **E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

It was just one example of the contradictions that have become a feature of the downstate farmer's second bid to challenge Democratic Gov. JB Pritzker for the state's top office, reflecting few lessons learned from his first unsuccessful effort or even from the stumblings of his GOP rivals in the March primary campaign.

Bailey 2.0 was supposed to be a chastened, more humble candidate after his nearly 13-percent-age-point loss to Pritzker four years ago. But while he no longer declares Chicago a "hellhole," as he did in 2022, and professes to better appreciate the city and suburbs, his social media remains filled with accounts of city crime and his vows

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### 'COMED FOUR' TRIAL

## Case that once rocked state politics now on shaky ground

By Jason Meisner  
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Three years ago, the "ComEd Four" trial alleging a massive conspiracy to bribe then-House Speaker Michael Madigan was headed toward a stunning guilty-on-all-counts conclusion, cementing its place as a pillar in the state's long, sordid history of corruption cases.

Or so it seemed at the time.

Now, after a pair of Supreme Court rulings on central issues like bribery and false statements, followed by a lightning-quick reversal by a Chicago appeals

court, the case that once rocked Illinois politics is on an increasingly shaky foundation.

Last week, a three-judge panel for the 7th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals took only a few hours after hearing arguments to announce it would reverse the convictions of two of the ComEd Four defendants, ex-CEO Anne Pramaggiore and retired lobbyist Michael McClain, who were ordered released from prison "forthwith."

The development has left the U.S. attorney's office in the

See **CASE** on Page A11

### State's 1st female House majority leader dies

Democratic state Rep. Barbara Flynn Currie was a champion for progressive causes and her lengthy stint as Illinois' first female majority leader opened doors for more women in the legislature. She died Thursday at 85. **Chicagoland, Page A2**



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# Slovenia holds romantic alpine retreat



**Rick Steves**

Tiny, overlooked Slovenia is one of Europe's most unexpectedly charming destinations. Nestled where the Alps meet the Adriatic Sea, this land boasts spectacular natural beauty, a fascinating recent history, and a spirit of adventure — and somehow has stayed off the typical tourist path. One of Slovenia's brightest gems is a romantic getaway that once entertained emperors and presidents: Lake Bled.

Tucked up against the northeast side of the rugged Julian Alps near the Austrian border, Lake Bled comes complete with a sweeping alpine panorama, a cliff-hanging medieval castle, a lazy lakeside promenade and a fairy-tale island topped with a church. Since the Habsburg days, this is where Slovenes take their guests — whether kings or cousins — to show off their country's natural beauty. And rightfully so.

Everyone here seems to stroll around the lake on its scenic four-mile path. At a leisurely pace, the path takes about an hour and a half, but I'd allow more time for snapping photos of the ever-changing views. While walking the promenade is slo-mo bliss, biking lets you fast-forward between the views of your choice. On the path, you'll also pass several imposing villas, mostly built by local aristocrats in the early 19th century. The most significant was a former residence of Yugoslav president-for-life Marshal Tito — today the Hotel Vila Bled, a fine place to stop for a coffee and pretend Tito invited you to drop by.

No visit to Lake Bled is complete without a trip to its steeple-capped island, which nudges the lake's quaintness level over the top. The most roman-



Lake Bled's tiny, church-capped island nudges the quaintness level over the top in this area of Slovenia, an overlooked part of Europe. **ADDIE MANNAN**

tic route to the island is to cruise on one of the distinctive flat-bottomed pletna boats. Like the iconic gondolas of Venice, these boats carry on a tradition dating back generations. Locals still build their pletnas by hand with larch wood from a design passed down from father to son for centuries. There's no keel, so the skilled oarsmen work hard to steer them with each stroke.

While watching them row is a special experience, a pletna ride is expensive — and the oarsmen stick close to their 30-minute waiting time on the island. For a more flexible, cost-friendly option, rent a wooden rowboat and observe the pletnas at work as you

paddle to the island.

The Church of the Assumption, which sits atop the tiny island, is the fifth house of worship to occupy this spot — which was originally the site of an eighth-century Slavic pagan temple. Today's Baroque version is popular for weddings, even if tradition dictates that the groom carries the bride up the 99 steps leading from the boat dock to the church door. Inside, hanging in the middle of the aisle just before the altar, is the church bell. A local superstition claims that if you can get this bell to ring three times with one big pull of the rope, your dreams will come true.

For the more adventur-

ous, hiking paths lead up into the hills surrounding the lake. The mountains poking above the ridge at the far end of the lake are crowned by the three peaks of Mount Triglav — Slovenia's highest peak and national symbol. The big mountain behind the town of Bled is Stol ("Chair"), part of the Karavanke range that defines the Austrian border. Bled is a great jumping-off point for a car trip through the Julian Alps, and a wide variety of other worthwhile side-trips are right at its doorstep.

For more fine views, hike up to Bled Castle. Dating in one form or another from about 1,000 years ago, this was the seat of the Austrian bishops of Brixen,

who controlled Bled in the Middle Ages. The various sights at the castle — a decent history museum, frescoed chapel, old-fashioned printing press, and wine cellar — are cute, but the real reason to come up here is to bask in the sweeping panoramas.

After a long, hard day of lake strolling and vista-viewing, reward yourself with some of Bled's famous desserts. The town's specialty is a cream cake called kremna rezina, with layers of cream and vanilla custard artfully sandwiched between sheets of delicate, crispy crust. Slovenes travel from all over the country to sample this famous dessert. Slightly less renowned, but just as tasty, is grmada (liter-

ally "bonfire"), a tasty treat developed by a Bled hotel as a way to use their day-old leftovers: Take yesterday's cake, add rum, milk, custard and raisins, and top it off with whipped cream and chocolate syrup.

Dessert in hand, sit on a dock, dip your feet in the water, and watch the lake's resident swans. As you do, you may find yourself wondering why more travelers don't put Slovenia higher on their itineraries.

*Rick Steves (www.ricksteves.com) writes European travel guidebooks and hosts travel shows on public television and public radio. Email him at rick@ricksteves.com and follow his blog on Facebook.*

## CELEBRITY TRAVEL

### Actor touts her region in Italy for vacations

By Jae-Ha Kim  
TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY

Born and raised in Savona, Italy, Stella Pecollo, an actor, writer and singer based in West Hollywood, California, said she enjoyed filming her latest project, "You, Me & Tuscany," in her native homeland.

"I play Francesca, the funniest sister-cousin you wish you had," Pecollo said. "She is a sassy, confident, fun, loving woman who adores Michael, played by Regé-Jean Page, and becomes close to Anna, played by Halle Bailey, whom she confides all the family gossip to."

This interview with Pecollo has been edited for length and clarity.

**Q: Would Francesca make a good travel partner?**

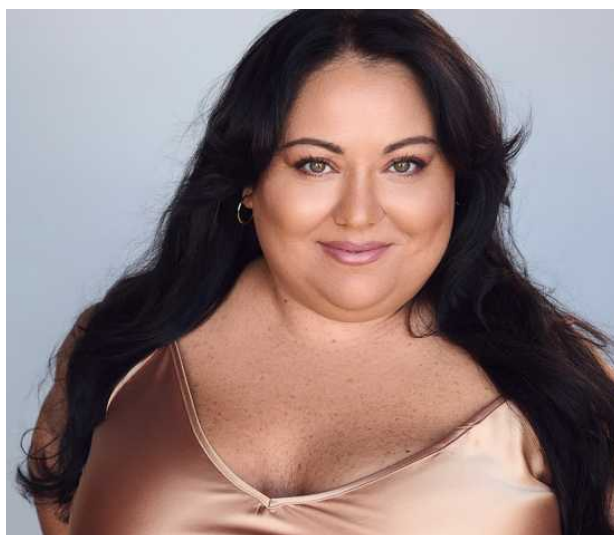
**A:** Absolutely! Francesca and I would have a blast. We would make a lot of noise wherever we went, dancing all over and meeting lots of new people, especially cute men.

**Q: Where did you film the movie?**

**A:** We shot in Rome and in Tuscany, both gorgeous and very hot locations during the summertime when we filmed.

**Q: Did you have any free time to explore Italy?**

**A:** I was born and raised in Italy, so I know the country pretty well. But Tuscany and in particular Val d'Orcia, the area we filmed, was quite new to me. Since I am an explorer and I love spas, I loved being there because I could explore the natural hot springs and eat amazing local food. What stood out were the landscapes, olive trees, nature and the



Stella Pecollo says returning to her native Italy to film "You, Me & Tuscany" was a dream come true. **JONNY MARLOW**

cute small towns surrounding the area.

**Q: Do you have any non-workrelated trips planned?**

**A:** Greece is on my bucket list this year. And Egypt.

**Q: What is your favorite vacation destination?**

**A:** Anywhere I can relax in warm weather, be by the sea and eat great food. That's probably why I love Puglia and LA so much.

**Q: What untapped destination should people know about?**

**A:** Definitely my region in Italy, Piemonte. It is still not very well known, but is very famous for wine and truffles. And for meat lovers, you can find amazing food options from our local farms.

**Q: What was a trip you took as a child that stands out?**

**A:** I remember a trip when I was little with my parents to Collodi. It's a place in Tuscany where Pinocchio was created. We went to the Pinocchio Park. I loved it because I could be next to all the imaginary figures I had only read about in the book before, like Pinocchio, the whale, etc.

**Q: If you've ever gone away for the holidays, which was the best trip?**

**A:** New York City during Christmastime and New Year's Eve. I remember it like it was yesterday — the Spice Girls were playing in

Times Square!

**Q: Do you have a knack for picking up new languages?**

**A:** Absolutely. I speak four languages and apparently it's also because I am a singer, so I have a good ear for sounds, which makes it easier to learn new languages.

**Q: What are your favorite cities?**

**A:** New York City, L.A., Rome, London, Shanghai and Gallipoli — all cities where I actually moved and lived for a while.

**Q: Where would you like to go that you have never been to before?**

**A:** Mexico, Puerto Rico, San Francisco, Niagara Falls. ... I'd like to do the classic coast-to-coast, and definitely Japan and Thailand. One day I would also love to visit Australia and Africa.

**Q: What is your best and/or worst vacation memory?**

**A:** There are many, but the best vacation I had that comes to mind is Barcelona. It was the first time I could travel without my parents. I went with a friend by bus, and I was so tired from the trip that I even fell asleep in a club with loud music! The worst one was probably in one of the apartments in Shanghai. There were cockroaches everywhere. I'm not a big fan of insects.

For more from the reporter, visit [www.jaehakim.com](http://www.jaehakim.com).

## TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

### Falling bag cracks phone screen, but compensation request denied

By Christopher Elliott | KING FEATURES SYNDICATE

On a recent flight from Copenhagen, Denmark, to Newark, New Jersey, on Scandinavian Airlines, I was in the aisle seat of an exit row.

The passenger in the middle seat had a heavy bag with a water bottle in her lap, which a flight attendant stowed overhead before departure.

Midway through the flight, another flight attendant opened the overhead bin, and the bag fell, banging my wrist and cracking my phone screen.

I submitted a compensation request to the Scandinavian Airlines System (SAS), but it was denied twice.

I then appealed to a vice president at SAS but never received a reply. I wanted SAS to pay for my phone repair.

— Christopher Kennedy, Astoria, New York

**A:** SAS should have handled this quickly and by the book. When a bag falls out of an overhead bin and damages your phone, this is considered an onboard accident, and you have a strong case under international law. Your detailed paper trail, photos and polite escalation to a company executive should all work in your favor.

The Montreal Convention, which governs international air travel, makes airlines liable for damage that gets caused by onboard accidents. A falling bag hitting a passenger fits this definition. While airlines often argue over what constitutes liability, the convention is clear that carriers are responsible for incidents that occur during a flight if they result in injury or damage to passenger property.

SAS also didn't follow its internal policies. The airline has long emphasized its commitment to customer service. Its code of conduct notes that "every promise made to

a customer is a commitment that we must deliver on in all situations." This principle underscores SAS' dedication to providing quality service and addressing customer concerns promptly. And in your case, it fell short.

Usually, a brief, polite email to an SAS executive will get the process moving. But in your case, it looks like it didn't.

If you find yourself in a similar situation, always document everything. Take photos of the damage, get names of crew members who assist you, and file a claim as soon as possible. Airlines are far more likely to respond when they see clear, detailed evidence and a calm request for compensation. This case is a reminder that even when airlines initially deny a claim, persistence — and a solid understanding of your rights — can pay off.

Of course, the best way to avoid a damage claim during a flight is to see a situation like this and take steps to prevent it. If some-

one is trying to stuff a bag into the overhead compartment, speak up. I've seen overhead compartments pop open in-flight, and you definitely wouldn't want a heavy bag falling on your head. If this happened, the repair bill would be more than \$400, and the damage could last for a lifetime. Fortunately, you weren't injured by the falling bag.

My team contacted SAS on your behalf to revisit your claim. Within days, the airline had a change of heart. "We have reviewed the matter further and have decided to proceed with a direct bank transfer as a gesture of goodwill in recognition of the inconvenience you experienced," a representative told you. SAS sent you \$400 to pay for a phone repair.

*Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps consumers resolve their problems. Contact him at [elliott.org/help](http://elliott.org/help) or [chris@elliott.org](mailto:chris@elliott.org).*