

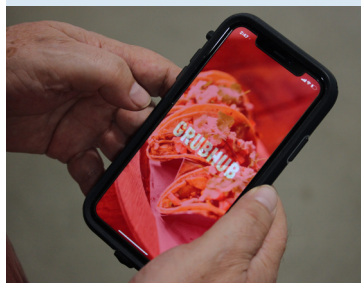
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'To better serve our students': Hundreds of millions of dollars of investment continue at LBCC



A welder works on the new Building M at Long Beach City College's Liberal Arts Campus, Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

■ By **BRANDON RICHARDSON**
Senior Reporter

Over the last 12 years, Long Beach City College has seen the investment of hundreds of millions of dollars in new construction, renovations and upgrades of critical infrastructure to create a more conducive—and sustainable—learning environment for students.

Multiple large-scale projects have already been completed on the journey to bring the nearly century-old school into the 21st century, but the full scope of improvements will not be realized for decades.

"All of our projects' goal is to better serve our stu-

dents' needs," said Marlene Drinkwine, vice president of business services for the community college. "Whether it's making existing buildings more functional for today's uses or building new spaces to reflect new technology, it's always about serving the students."

The historic investment is funded through voter-approved bond measures E (2008) and LB (2016). At \$854 million, Measure LB is the single-largest investment ever made into the college. In all, LBCC officials are authorized to issue up to \$1.3 billion in bonds. Additional project financing is provided by the state.

"We have a very full and

aggressive schedule through 2041 to make the best use of the community's investment in our college," Drinkwine said. "We are not letting up."

Two of the school's most recently completed projects include a new parking structure at its Pacific Coast Campus and a full renovation of the auditorium at its Liberal Arts Campus.

Originally built in 1956, the auditorium was outdated and had to be brought up to code, particularly when it came to its accessibility features and the inclusion of air conditioning. With the introduction of elevators and ramps, the \$32 million project made the entirety of the build-

(Please Continue to Page 10)

Queen Mary operator files for Chapter 11 bankruptcy

■ By **KELLY PUENTE**
Staff Reporter

Bankruptcy hearings for the Queen Mary's operator kicked off in Delaware court on Thursday, Jan. 21 and could last several weeks as Long Beach city leaders consider possible outcomes for the historic ocean liner.

The ship's future plunged into uncertainty on Monday, Jan. 18, when the entities under Singapore-based Eagle Hospitality Trust, which operates the Queen Mary and two dozen other hotel properties across the United States, filed for bankruptcy with a total of more than \$500 million in debt.

Long Beach has owned the century-old vessel since it arrived from Scotland in 1967 as a hotel and tourist attraction. For decades, the city has leased the ship to various operators who were charged with maintenance, and many of those operators have met similar financial struggles.

Now, the Queen Mary's fate is once again uncertain.

In an interview this week, Long Beach City Manager Tom Modica said Eagle Hospitality remains obligated for the ship's daily upkeep and long-term projects under the lease agreement.

Under the Chapter 11 bankruptcy, Eagle Hospitality will restructure to keep businesses afloat and pay off creditors. The city is hopeful that Eagle will choose to keep its Queen Mary lease since it has listed the ship in court documents as one of its most valuable assets, Modica

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Long Beach caps delivery app fees at 15% in effort to help restaurants limited to takeout



Long Beach officials capped delivery fees for app-based services such as Grubhub and Postmates. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

■ By **JASON RUIZ**
Staff Reporter

With restaurants struggling to stay afloat during mandated dine-in closures during the pandemic, the Long Beach City Council voted Tuesday, Jan. 19, to cap the fees that third-party services charge them to deliver food.

The new ordinance will cap the fees charged to restaurants at 15% and put other restrictions on delivery services like GrubHub, Uber Eats, DoorDash and Postmates.

Limiting fees could help restaurateurs hold onto more of their revenue. Some reported delivery apps charging up to 30% in fees.

“While it might not seem like a lot, this extra percentage could be the difference between it costing us money to serve that meal—meaning actually losing money while working—or making it a sustainable sale,” said Stephanie Lyn Carlough, owner of Plunge LBC.

She asked the council to extend the cap for at least one year after the local health orders are lifted. Restaurants are currently banned from offering dine-in service, including outdoor dining.

The Long Beach ordinance, which is set to go into effect immediately once Mayor

Robert Garcia signs it, is expected to be reviewed on a revolving 90-day basis. However, other cities like Los Angeles have already extended their delivery fee caps until after restaurants are allowed to operate at 100% capacity.

Delivery app companies have pushed back against the fee cap. A spokesman for GrubHub previously called the idea “well-intentioned but counterproductive,” arguing that it would hurt drivers who rely on the apps to make money.

“The caps lower pay for drivers by reducing the number of orders to be delivered,” GrubHub said in a statement last month, “which severely impacts how many customers and orders we can bring to these restaurants.”

Nevertheless, setting the cap at 15% drew unanimous support from the council as members sought to address an issue created in part by the city and state’s own health orders, which are keeping people at home while simultaneously banning dining in at restaurants.

“I think this really is urgent right now. As you know our small businesses, our restaurants are suffering greatly during this pandemic,” said Councilwoman Mary Zendejas. “Even though this is a tiny, tiny fix it brings me a little bit of hope for restaurants.” ■



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Grocers file suit alleging city's new 'hero pay' ordinance unconstitutional



Shoppers get carts at a North Long Beach grocery store amid a fresh round of panic buying due to the coronavirus pandemic surge that began in late November. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

■ By **JASON RUIZ**
Staff Reporter

The California Grocers Association filed a lawsuit against Long Beach Wednesday, Jan. 20, the day after the City Council voted to require \$4 per hour in additional pay for grocery workers who continue to be exposed to COVID-19 while working through the pandemic.

A lawsuit filed Wednesday in Los Angeles federal court asks that the ordinance be declared invalid and unconstitutional.

The association, which represents about 6,000 grocery stores across the state, is asking for an injunction to stop implementation of the law until it can be brought before a judge.

The suit claims the emergency ordinance singles out grocery stores despite other sectors like public safety, transportation and restaurants, which are deemed essential but have not been required to pay workers extra money.

It also suggests that Long Beach's ordinance is preempted by a federal labor law that protects collective bargaining process. Some grocery store employees are part of local unions that negotiated pay structures with the grocery chains.

Long Beach spokesman Kevin Lee

said the city is aware of the suit but has yet to be served with it.

"Once the City has been served with the lawsuit, it will be reviewed and evaluated and an appropriate response will be filed as part of the legal process," Lee said.

Ron Fong, president and CEO of the California Grocers Association, said in a statement that grocery stores have already undertaken "a massive effort to institute measures to make both workers and customers safer in stores."

He warned that the ordinance could lead to higher grocery prices and could even affect store hours, the number of hours provided to employees and possible closures.

Long Beach's ordinance would apply to companies with 300 or more workers nationally and with 15 employees per store within the city. It would last at least 120 days.

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors may take similar action, with a vote expected Jan. 26 on a mandatory \$5 an hour pay raise for grocery workers. A representative from the grocers association said it would likely file suit against the county as well, if the measure passes.

The grocery industry has been one of the few sectors of the economy to benefit from economic shutdowns as

their stores were deemed essential services and remained open since the shutdowns began in March.

A report from the Brookings Institution said national grocers like Kroger, which includes Ralphs in its collection of stores, reaped profits as high as 90% above normal during first half of 2020.

Grocery workers have reported that some did receive additional pay at the outset of the pandemic, but

that has now vanished, leaving them to work in possibly hazardous conditions while infection rates continue to climb across the country.

Mayor Robert Garcia posted a picture of himself on Twitter Wednesday morning signing the emergency ordinance into law.

"You have earned this hero pay," Garcia said in the tweet. "Thank you for your hard work." ■

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Long Beach
BUSINESS JOURNAL

As vaccinations progress, more industries fight to move their workers to the front of the line



A syringe is filled with the COVID-19 vaccine for senior residents and staff at Bixby Knolls Tower in Long Beach, Wednesday, Jan. 6, 2021. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

■ By **ALENA MASCHKE**
Senior Reporter

The city of Long Beach began vaccinating essential workers outside of the healthcare field on Tuesday, Jan. 19, and dockworkers at the Port of Long Beach say they should be receiving the vaccine alongside them.

Currently scheduled to be vaccinated in March, which still gives them priority over other industry sectors, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union has made its plea to the city, the county and the governor that they shouldn't have to wait any longer.

"We've had numerous people pass away," said Daniel Miranda, president of ILWU Local 94. "We just want to be moved up and slotted correctly."

Port workers are not unique in their efforts to pressure local and statewide leaders for priority in receiving vac-

nations. Since December, unions and advocacy groups for various industries have lobbied to secure their members a spot at the top of the list, each making the argument that workers in their field are essential and especially at risk of falling ill or spreading the virus to others.

So far, the city of Long Beach has decided to stay in line with the state's priorities in crafting its vaccination schedule.

"Our goal, of course, is to give it to everybody," Long Beach City Health Officer Dr. Anissa Davis said. But for now, she added, the city is "focusing on those of the highest risk."

The amount of doses of the vaccine the city receives also plays a significant role in determining who can get vaccinated at which point.

"It's really difficult to plan and to add people because we just don't know

what we're going to have," Davis said, referring to the unpredictability of vaccine deliveries.

But union officials said there's no time to waste when it comes to port workers.

Since cases began ramping up again in November, the union local of 393 members has seen 40 coronavirus infections, according to Miranda, with three workers currently hospitalized. Across the three local union chapters of 9,260 members, 10 ILWU workers have died of COVID-19.

"The economic impact if we had a shutdown at the ports would be huge, throughout the country," said Miranda.

"A chain is only as strong as its weakest link," he added. "If we're weakened, it would affect the whole supply chain."

But even advocates for industries with a smaller local footprint are mak-

ing their plea to be included among the priority groups or moved up to an earlier tier.

Elliot Lewis, owner of the Catalyst brand of marijuana dispensaries, which has several locations in Long Beach and the surrounding area, said workers in his industry should receive priority as well.

"Cannabis is high on the hierarchy of needs for people," said Lewis. "I think cannabis workers should be as high as anybody on that list."

The pandemic has not left the industry or Lewis' business unaffected, as several of his staff members caught the virus over the course of the past year. "It's been an ongoing battle to stay open, and keep workers and the public safe," he said.

The city did not clarify whether cannabis workers would receive any priority over other groups. ■

Hawaiian Airlines opens COVID-19 testing site at Long Beach Airport for its passengers

■ By **BRANDON RICHARDSON**
Senior Reporter

Hawaiian Airlines on Jan. 12 opened a COVID-19 testing site at Long Beach Airport for passengers flying from the municipal airfield to Honolulu. This is the airport's first dedicated testing site.

The drive-through service is available exclusively for Hawaiian passengers utilizing one of the airline's five weekly flights. The service costs \$90 in addition to the price of the ticket and results are guaranteed within 36 hours.

Beginning Saturday, Jan. 16, Long Beach Airport also began operation of its own general drive-through COVID-19 testing site available for all other passengers traveling through the facility. The city site will be operated by Covid Clinic daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and provide rapid results within two hours.

For its testing site, Hawaiian partnered with Long Beach-based Worksite Labs, which operates the testing site daily from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m.

"We think about testing in terms of people being sick but very seldom do we build capacity so that people can live normal lives. Beyond being sick, people need to be tested for work, for school, for travel," Worksite Labs CEO and Long Beach resident Gary Frazier said. "In a perfect world, every single person would be tested, not just when you're in trouble."

Frazier said he expects the site to administer an average of about 100 tests per day once fully operational and advertised. A dedicated lab has been set up in tandem with the airport testing location, which allows Worksite to offer the quick result turnaround time, Frazier said.

All travelers to the islands ages 5 and up must present a negative coronavirus test taken no more than 72 hours before the flight departure. The negative result must then be uploaded onto a state website prior to departure. Failure to present a negative test results in a 10-day quarantine upon arrival.

To ensure travelers are tested within the appropriate window for their specific departure, Frazier said they must enter their departure date into the Worksite website, which will then only show dates that meet Hawaii's requirement.

The island state is extremely strict when it comes to COVID-19 safety protocols. In December, a couple traveling back home to Wailua with their 4-year-old child was arrested upon arrival to the island because they had tested positive for the virus prior to their flight and knowingly still boarded their flight.

The Long Beach testing location is Worksite's sixth along the coast. By mid-February Frazier said the company will be up to about 11 sites from San Diego to Portland. ■



A Worksite Lab employee is one of the first travelers to utilize Hawaiian Airlines' new COVID-19 test site at Long Beach Airport, Tuesday, Jan. 12, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.



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SBA approves \$5 billion in PPP loans in first week of relaunched program

■ By **ALENA MASCHKE**
Senior Reporter

The U.S. Small Business Administration announced that it has approved \$5 billion worth of Paycheck Protection Program loans from approximately 60,000 applicants in the first week of the relaunched program, a number that is likely to grow quickly now that larger financial institutions are allowed to participate.

As of Jan. 19, agency-approved lenders with more than \$1 billion in assets are also able to submit their clients' loan applications for the long-awaited new round of the federal Paycheck Protection Program.

This means the door has been opened for local banks such as Farmers & Merchants Bank, the local institution that processed the highest volume of loan applications for the first round of PPP loans last year, to begin processing loan applications.

In total, the Small Business Administration is set to give out \$284.5 billion

in loans to businesses, with \$30 billion set aside for applicants using smaller lenders and community financial institutions, such as certified Community Development Financial Institutions, Minority Depository Institutions, Certified Development Companies and Microloan Intermediaries.

This second round of the program was initially rolled out the week of Jan. 11, but applications first became available through community financial institutions, a subset of banks and other lenders who meet specific criteria only.

Within this priority group, the application process was broken down by first-time borrowers and businesses applying for additional PPP funds.

The application window first opened for first-time borrowers—called “first draw applicants” in SBA parlance—who apply through community financial institutions. In total, \$35 billion has been set aside for businesses that are first-time recipients.

For businesses that already received a

loan through the program last year, but have since used up all the funds—or will have done so by the time the new round of loans is disbursed—the application window opened shortly after, if they applied through a community financial institution.

“SBA has worked expeditiously to ensure our policies and systems are relaunched so that this vital small business aid helps communities hardest hit by the pandemic,” agency head Jovita Carranza said.

After loans to large companies came under scrutiny when the first round of funds were disbursed, only companies with 500 or fewer employees across all locations qualify for an initial loan this time, with the exception of news organizations and companies in the food and hospitality sector.

Companies applying for a second round of funding under the program can have no more than 300 employees and have to show proof of at least 25% in year-over-year revenue loss to be eligible.

Independent contractors and sole proprietors also qualify.

Additionally, there are limitations on the amount of money a business can borrow under the program. The specific amount each business is eligible for is calculated based on its payroll expenses, with food and hospitality businesses qualifying for additional funds, but the maximum loan amount for first-time borrowers is set at \$10 million.

Just like during the first rendition of the program, 60% of the loan amount has to go toward payroll. But this time, the categories of eligible expenses for the remaining 40% have been expanded to include worker protections such as personal protective equipment, damages from looting or vandalism that took place in 2020, and professional services like cloud computing.

PPP loans carry an interest rate of 1% and can be fully forgiven—principal and interest—as long as spending requirements are met. ■

Mayor touts economic relief, pandemic vaccination program during his 7th State of the City address

■ By **JASON RUIZ**
Staff Reporter

Mayor Robert Garcia in his State of the City Address promised economic relief for grocery store workers and others who are struggling amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and said the city's efforts to vaccinate the local population are moving forward at a rapid pace.

The annual State of the City event was hosted remotely as the coronavirus pandemic continues to ravage the city. Long Beach has now seen more than 40,000 positive cases, and more than 500 people have died as a result of COVID-19.

Garcia, who lost his mother and stepfather to the virus, said there can be strength in loss.

“It's painful but it can make you stronger,” Garcia said. “I've never felt more determined or more confident in leading this city through this crisis.”

Garcia also announced a number of new economic programs, including a raise for grocery store workers that was passed by the City Council Jan. 19, and a new basic income program for low-income students at Long Beach City College, like the ones the city has adopted last year to benefit artists and low-income residents.

For tenants who have struggled to pay their rents over the past nine

months due to job loss because of the pandemic, Garcia announced the city would be creating a \$15 million fund to help them pay their back rents and hopefully stave off an eviction crisis that experts have warned was loom-

ing in 2021.

“This will be the single largest tenant assistance program we have ever launched in our city's history, and it's necessary,” Garcia said.

The city had previously approved

a \$5 million program over the summer that paid up to \$1,000 in rent for three months, but tenants who qualified had to enter a lottery system to gain access to the funds. ■



Long Beach Mayor Robert Garcia spoke to an empty theater during his seventh State of the City address. The event was live streamed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Photo courtesy of the City of Long Beach.

Long Beach restaurateur who violated COVID rules now faces multiple misdemeanor charges



A man walks past Restauration as the restaurant owner holds a meeting with other Long Beach restaurateurs, Monday, January 11, 2021. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

■ By **JASON RUIZ**
Staff Reporter

For the first time since the beginning of the pandemic, Long Beach authorities have filed criminal charges against a business owner accused of violating coronavirus health orders, the city prosecutor's office announced today.

The owner of Restauration, a restaurant on Fourth Street, has been charged with four misdemeanors related to operating a business in violation of state and city COVID-19 regulations, according to a statement from City Prosecutor Doug Haubert.

"The case is based on evidence presented to the city prosecutor's office that show after multiple warnings the operator of Restauration continued to allow and facilitate on-premises dining, with diners sitting in close proximity to one another and not requiring the wearing of masks," Haubert said.

Dana Tanner, the owner, has openly defied the health orders in the past, saying she was staying open to keep

her business afloat and to help employees make ends meet and keep their insurance.

"I am here to keep people employed that want to work. The sense of pride and identity that people have with their jobs is critical," Tanner said in a statement. "I have had team members commit suicide from losing their job, end up homeless, become alcoholics and lose nearly everything."

Tanner said she believes she's been able to provide a safe working environment for her employees. She contends many restaurant owners feel the same way.

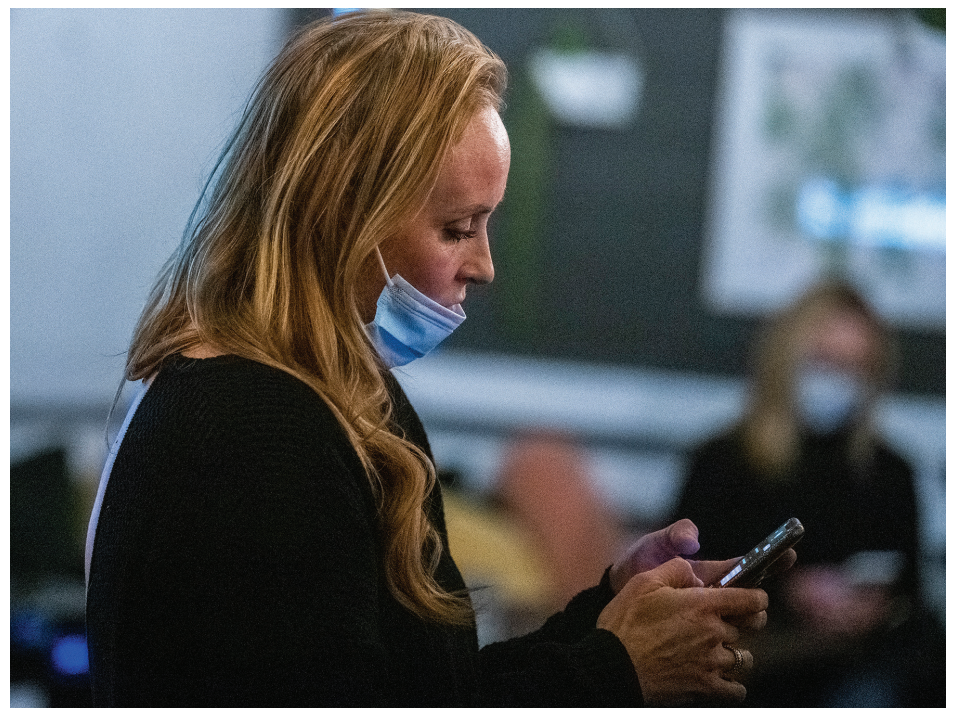
"There is a difference between staying closed because it is the right thing to do and staying closed because they are afraid of what others will think of them for standing up for themselves, their team and their business," she said.

The city prosecutor alleges Tanner violated the state and city health orders specifically on Jan. 8 and 9. The state and city orders are counted separately, making the total number of charges four.

The maximum punishment for each violation is six months in county jail and a \$1,000 fine, although Hau-

bert said Tanner would likely only be sentenced for either the state or city

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Dana Tanner, owner of Restauration, on her phone before a meeting with other local restaurant owners, Monday, January 11, 2021. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

(Continued from Page 7)

violations, not both.

This is the first time Long Beach officials have resorted to criminal charges against anyone accused of violating the city's health orders. The city has relied heavily on an education-first approach with ample warnings and administrative citations.

Restauration first came onto the city's radar when it advertised for a New Year's Eve dinner that included

a DJ and open bar. Despite a warning from the city before the event, Tanner went forward with the dinner on her restaurant's back patio.

Since then, she has been fined six times, authorities said. As of Jan. 11, the city suspended her health permit to operate. Officials have not yet shut off the business' water, according to a city spokeswoman.

Tanner was also working to encourage other restaurant owners to

join her in violating the health orders, hosting a small gathering of other restaurateurs on Jan. 11.

Haubert said additional charges may come as the city gathers more evidence of noncompliance on other dates.

"The case was presented to my office because of numerous incidents where code inspectors went to the restaurant and saw clear violations of the COVID orders," Haubert said.

"... Our goal is to not have anyone put in jail; our goal is to enforce the COVID rules."

He said his office is only going after the most egregious violators of the health orders.

"I don't want to prosecute these cases, but I do want to make sure the law is followed and the public is safe," Haubert said. ■

Dozens of cargo ships are parking for days off Long Beach's coast due to port backlogs



Cargo ships wait for days off the coast of Long Beach due to the San Pedro Bay Ports being overwhelmed with record cargo. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

■ By **KELLY PUENTE**
Staff Reporter

An usually high number of container ships are dotting the Long Beach coastline—sometimes waiting up to five days to dock—due to a perfect storm of record cargo numbers, the coming Chinese New Year and limited capacity at warehouses due to the COVID-19 pandemic, officials said.

Despite a slowdown at the beginning of 2020 as the pandemic hit, the Port of Long Beach last year saw its busiest year on record, moving more than 8.1 million cargo container units, up 6.3% from 2019.

Consumer goods largely fueled the second half of 2020 as demand rose for medical supplies and home improvement items, like exercise equipment and office furniture, as

more people worked from home in the pandemic.

Overall, December marked the busiest month in Port of Long Beach's 110-year history as trade jumped 23% thanks to a holiday season surge and a rush of ships making up for voyages that were canceled earlier in the year.

But the record numbers have resulted in a massive backup at both the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles as ships sit off the coastline waiting for days to unload. Over the past two months, an average of about two dozen ships were waiting to get into the ports, said Noel Hacegaba, deputy executive director for the Port of Long Beach.

Recently, about 30 ships were anchored off the Long Beach coast as a thick brown haze lined the horizon.

"They don't normally have to wait, but demand in America is through the

roof," he said.

Hacegaba said three main factors are causing the mass backup. First, the ports typically see a rush in January as ships try to get in goods before the Chinese New Year, when the region shuts down for two weeks. Chinese New Year kicks off Feb. 12.

Second, warehouses are limiting capacity and workers due to COVID-19 safety protocols, which further slows the supply chain. And third, consumer spending is up in the pandemic, with more people shopping online and driving imports from China.

"The supply and demand forces are at work," Hacegaba said.

Port officials expect the backup to subside by late February or March, but the demand for consumer home goods will likely last through the summer, he said.

Executive Director Mario Cordero in a statement said the volume is putting a strain on "frontline dockworkers, terminal operators, truck drivers and other essential personnel" who are moving record amounts of cargo while facing the risk of contracting COVID-19.

Dockworkers are currently on the state's schedule to receive the COVID-19 vaccine in March, but they are now lobbying to be given higher priority as essential workers.

"This country's waterfront workforce needs to be moved ahead in the line for the COVID-19 vaccine," Cordero said in a statement. "The vaccine needs to be made available to these essential workers immediately; they have kept this country's supply chain functioning since Day One of the pandemic, and they are at high risk." ■

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Crews construct the new Building M at the Long Beach City College Liberal Arts Campus, Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

LBCC improvements

(Continued from Page 1)
ing accessible for all.

The renovation also included the addition of more than 14,000 square feet to the already existing 38,000-square-foot building for classrooms, offices and rehearsal space. New technology, including audio and visual equipment, was installed, while preserving the “fantastic acoustics,” Drinkwine added.

As the coronavirus pandemic rages on, the revamped facility will not host performances for months.

“While we would much rather have been able to welcome crowds into the auditorium immediately,” Drinkwine said, “this gives a little bit extra time to make sure everything’s in place and ready to go the very moment we can resume in-person classes.”

The parking structure, located on the northwest corner of Pacific Coast Highway and Walnut Avenue, is the school’s first parking structure that “beautifies the neighborhood,” Drinkwine said.

The design includes low-cost accents on the exterior to match the Art Deco industrial aesthetic of the campus, she explained. Functionally, the structure has more than 500 parking spaces, including numerous electric-vehicle stalls. Solar panels are also included on the uppermost level.

While many projects remain in the design phase, other projects have already begun taking shape at both campuses. Two major projects are under construction at the Liberal Arts Campus: a multidisciplinary classroom building and new outdoor kinesiology lab and aquatics center facilities.

Buildings M and N, both constructed in 1935, have been demolished and the steel structure of a new Building M has sprouted from the cleared space. The nearly 82,000-square-foot, three-story building will contain classrooms and offices for such subjects as language arts, foreign language, and computer and office studies, Drinkwine said. The entire ground floor will house a slew of student services.

Construction of the \$77 million project began in spring 2020 and is expected to be completed in spring 2022. That state provided nearly \$28 million for the project, allowing

LBCC officials to allocate bond money to other projects.

With a budget of nearly \$75 million, according to a recent update presented to the citizens’ oversight committee charged with monitoring the bond money, the new outdoor kinesiology lab and aquatics project includes a new outdoor competition-sized pool with spectator seating, which is noticeably absent from the existing, smaller pool. The project also includes a new softball field, which will be relocated near the baseball field, a new soccer field, and new tennis and volleyball courts.

“We’re really excited about this

project. It’s going to serve not only our athletes but the rest of our students,” Drinkwine said. “For instance, there’s a portion of the pool that’s going to be used by the kinesiology program for in-water uses.”

The project is slated for completion by spring 2022.

At the Pacific Coast Campus, phase one of renovations are underway on Building MM that will ultimately house career and technical education programs such as construction. The first of the two-phase project is expected to be completed sometime in 2022. The second phase of the project, which will be home to industrial technology, anthropology, horticulture and other programs, is in the planning phase and expected to be completed in 2025.

To accommodate new and upgraded buildings at the Liberal Arts Campus, \$6 million was spent to expand the onsite central plant, which allows the campus’ air-conditioning and other systems to be regulated as energy-efficiently as possible. All new buildings and structures are built using solar panels and other sustainable techniques.

Hundreds of millions of dollars worth of other projects remain at various stages of planning, including a music theater complex and numerous renovations. The nearly \$80 million theater complex includes the demolition of two buildings to make way for a new building that will include indoor and outdoor stages. This project will be partially funded through state Proposition 51 funds.

“It’s critical that we provide environments that allow us to provide education that is relevant,” Drinkwine said. “To provide environments that best support student learning and the delivery of specific education.” ■



One future project at Long Beach City College is the new Building G, which will be home to performing arts classrooms, offices and even an outdoor stage. Rendering courtesy of DLR Group.

Educators fought to help disadvantaged students; now they fear coronavirus will erase that progress

■ By **CRYSTAL NIEBLA**
Staff Reporter

On many school days, Maria Teresa Loeza said her elementary and middle school kids wave their Chromebooks around the house on Walnut Avenue and 15th Street in Long Beach, searching for a stronger internet connection.

Sometimes her 13-year-old stays up late at night to submit assignments, growing frustrated when the signal cuts off while documents upload.

Her 9-year-old's grades, meanwhile, are dropping.

"It makes me sad; it makes me angry," Loeza, 45, said in Spanish.

Loeza's family is among many struggling amid an unprecedented 10-month shutdown of schools in Long Beach intended to halt the spread of the coronavirus. But for students of color from disadvantaged neighborhoods, the consequences of the closure might be especially dire, as officials worry they are losing gains in academics made before the pandemic arrived last March.

This month, the heads of seven urban school districts across California, including Long Beach, wrote a pointed letter to the governor, calling out the disparities and urging the state to craft a uniform plan for reopening that won't leave districts—and students—further behind wealthier areas that may be able to open sooner and get a boost in state money because of it.

'I'm failing my students'

Prior to the pandemic, students of color had shown improvements, with increases in graduation rates for Latinx (a gender-neutral term the district uses instead of Latino) and African American students by 11% and 10%, respectively, within the past decade, according to Long Beach Unified School District data.

Latinx students make up 58% of the district's population, which serves as an indicator how the district performs overall. African American students make up 12%.

LBUSD is currently analyzing data in key assessment areas such as math readiness for the past 11 months, with concrete data on how the pandemic may have affected academic progress across all groups to be revealed in February, said Chris Brown, assistant superintendent of research and school improvement.

But anecdotally, officials say they are hearing from parents and teachers that students of color, as well as those with special needs, are falling behind, Brown said.

In early October, parents and teachers gave emotional testimony before the school board, detailing myriad struggles students are having, including lack of support at home; not having a quiet, safe place to study; lack of internet access; and stress from being logged on to a computer all day.

Cubberley Elementary School teacher Debi Bober, a 2018 Teacher of the Year in Los Angeles County, said bluntly: "I cannot meet the needs of my students right now. I'm failing my students and I'm trying my hardest."

A survey conducted in June by the local district showed no one is particularly pleased with virtual learning. On a question about "frequent challenges," 42% of students reported regularly feeling unmotivated, 33% were dealing with caring for a sibling, 30% had no quiet place to work, and 17% had internet issues.

National, state and regional studies paint a similar picture, with students of color and in high-poverty communities falling further behind their peers.

A survey in the Los Angeles Unified School District, a neighboring district, showed that between March 16 and May 22, Black and Hispanic students participated 10 to 20 percentage points less than White and Asian students in distance learning. The study measured participation based on how often middle and high school students submitted assignments, took tests or posted messages.

On the state level, a Los Angeles Times

survey of 45 Southern California school districts revealed that on average, about half the students in low-income-serving districts had computers available for distance learning when campuses closed. In the largest districts, the survey shows, nearly two-thirds of students had them.

By contrast, in the most affluent-serving districts, an average of 87% of students had computers when campuses closed, and 98% had them about three weeks later, according to the survey.

This stark disparity led one local legislator, Assemblyman Patrick O'Donnell, D-Long Beach, to state in mid-November that the closures have amounted to "state-sanctioned segregation."

The Long Beach district announced last month that classes will remain virtual until at least March 1, with the rollout on teacher vaccinations set to begin on Jan. 25.

But Long Beach officials have said districts are not on a level playing field when it comes to the ability to reopen. And funding that the state is promising needs to take into account the unique challenges that urban districts such as Long Beach face.

'Safe Schools for All'

Gov. Gavin Newsom in late December announced a \$2 billion "Safe Schools for All" plan to encourage more schools to reopen for in-person instruction this year.

The plan notes that kids are contracting COVID-19 less often than adults and do not seem to be major sources of transmission. With the right precautions, officials are not seeing many outbreaks in schools, according to the governor's memo.

Districts that restart in-person learning will receive additional funding of at least \$450 per student, plus an additional amount as high as \$250 per student based on the number of high needs students (low-income students, English learners, foster and homeless children) each district has.

But the money will only be provided if schools reopen, with a target date of Feb. 1.

The coronavirus, however, is far more rampant in urban areas such as Long Beach and Los Angeles, neither of which are anywhere near meeting the state's cri-

(Please Continue to Page 12)



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Daniela Alvarez-Loeza, 9, right, and her sister Gabriela Alvarez-Loeza, 13, work on their school's Chromebooks outside of their Long Beach home. Wednesday, Dec. 16, 2020. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

(Continued from Page 11)

teria for reopening.

Under the plan, districts could open if they are in counties where the rate of coronavirus cases is 28 per 100,000 residents or less; in Long Beach alone, that number is around 141 per 100,000 residents.

That means districts hardest hit by the virus will lose out on funding, while those in more affluent areas are likely to move faster toward reopening—again putting students of color at a disadvantage, they argue.

The seven district superintendents instead ask the state to help them mitigate the spread of the virus, and in the meantime, help provide the support needed to keep students from falling further behind.

So far, the Long Beach district has doled out thousands of hotspots and Chromebooks, and officials have said that anyone who wants or needs a Chromebook, internet or any other type of school-related help should call the district immediately. The district is also set to receive nearly \$100 million from the federal government to help pay for COVID-related expenses this year.

But even if families have the equipment, one of the greatest barriers for virtual learning is simple internet connection.

Parents constantly complain about the poor reception, seemingly affecting certain neighborhoods more than others.

LBUSD Board member Juan Benitez said that if parents communicate with teachers or school administrators that their internet connection is poor, teachers

shouldn't punish students for it.

Language is another barrier.

"A lot of parents I speak to, they don't know how to support their students because they don't have high levels of English understanding," Benitez said.

Before the pandemic, Loeza didn't have internet service. Not tech savvy, she frequently asks her college-educated neighbor for help. While Loeza studied at community colleges only to learn English, she said her neighbor is more familiar

with computers after studying at Cal State Long Beach.

"As a parent, I wish I could help them more," she said in Spanish. "None of us were ready for something virtual like this." ■



Sisters work on their school-issued Chromebooks outside of their Long Beach home. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

Failing grades double under LBUSD distance learning

■ By **MIKE GUARDASBACIO**
Correspondent

Almost a third of all grades issued by Long Beach Unified teachers in the first quarter of this school year were D's or F's, a massive jump compared to the previous year, according to data released Jan. 20.

In the first quarter of the 2019-20 school year, just 13.61% of LBUSD-issued grades were a D or an F. That number rose to 31.75% in the first quarter of the 2020-21 school year.

The massive spike in failing marks coincides with the district's first grading period under distance learning. It issued only pass/fail grades in the spring of 2020 when the pandemic first forced classes online.

While this semester of grades won't be finalized for another two weeks, the snapshot of progress report data provides the first public view of how local students' grades are faring during campus closures triggered by the coronavirus.

"Like other school districts, we have seen some increase in D's and F's compared to the prior year," LBUSD spokesperson Chris Eftychiou said. "We're also seeing some improvement in that regard since the quarter ended."

In the few weeks since the first quarter ended, the district's D and F percentage trended down to 27.86%.

The overall slip in grades is not just from C-average students who are doing worse. There's been a massive loss in high-achieving grades as well. In the first quarter of the last school year, 47.10% of LBUSD grades were A's. That slipped to 37.17% this year and fell even further to 29.76% a few weeks after the first quarter ended.

The LBUSD is not alone. Studies across the country have found that students are struggling with distance learning, with failing grades spiking wherever school campuses are closed.

Emotional health has also suffered, with the CDC reporting a 44% increase in mental health-related emergency department visits by children, year over year.

Grading guidelines

It's clear from the district's actions over the previous 10 months that this is a problem officials anticipated. In the spring, the district embraced a "do no harm" philosophy that meant no report cards for elementary students, and pass/fail or credit/no credit grades for students in sixth through 12th grade.

And in November, the LBUSD produced a "Grading for Equity" guideline that encouraged its teachers to answer the



Students walk out of the school gym after Human I-T handed out Chromebooks and a hotspot with two months of free internet to low-income families at Hamilton Middle School in North Long Beach. Photo by Thomas R Cordova.

question "How do grading practices need to differ in a distance learning environment?"

Among the suggestions were responding to "students' needs sensitively and flexibly" using methods including "soft deadlines," allowing students to retake tests or resubmit work, not assigning points for attendance and not grading homework.

Summer school

The massive spike in failing grades will require an investment in summer school and other programs to allow students to make up classes, LBUSD superintendent Jill Baker said in a recent Q&A discussion.

"We are thinking at each level about a different kind of learning experience in the summer to help them recover," she said. "There will be opportunities for our high school students to take a lot more courses (than are traditionally offered)."

Disproportionate impact

The LBUSD's grades data was not segmented by economic status, but studies across the state and nation have shown that the increase in failing grades has been exacerbated by the disproportionate harm that distance learning has done to low-

er-income students.

Lack of quality internet and quiet learning spaces are among the many challenges facing less-wealthy students.

That disproportionate impact has prompted the Los Angeles Unified School District to implement a "no-fail" policy that will extend into the next semester. ■

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Letter Grade	Q1 2019-20	Q1 2020-21	Jan. 6, 2021
A	47.10%	37.17%	29.76%
B	24.85%	17.85%	23.40%
C	14.44%	13.23%	18.98%
D/F	13.61%	31.75%	27.86%

Data provided by the Long Beach Unified School District shows the number of students receiving failing grades has doubled under virtual learning. Graphic by Brandon Richardson.

How an LBUSD grad navigated a difficult path to become the school board's youngest member



Long Beach Unified School District Board of Education member Erik Miller stands in front of Long Beach Poly High School. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

■ By **CRYSTAL NIEBLA**
Staff Reporter

Political newcomer Erik Miller knew he was facing steep odds when he challenged an opponent with high name recognition, deep political connections and a formidable resume for a seat on the Long Beach school board.

Among other high-profile state and local positions, opponent Tonia Reyes Uranga served for eight years on the Long Beach City Council. Her husband, Roberto Uranga, is now in his second council term in that same seat.

“I had multiple people saying that I was wasting my time and wasting my efforts,” Miller recalled in a recent interview with the Post. “It really only drove me even further and made me work harder.”

That approach to adversity and opportunity seems to be a defining theme in Miller’s life. He has tackled one challenge after another on his way to becoming, at age 36, the youngest member on the Long Beach school board, narrowly defeating Uranga, the early favorite.

On Dec. 15, with a Christmas tree lit behind him in his California Heights home, Miller faced his computer and raised his right hand as he was sworn in online by his 74-year-old predecessor, Felton Williams.

Miller’s arrival on the board—where he’ll be joining two members in their 40s—is expected to usher in a more progressive era for a five-member body controlled for years by an aging majority.

Miller has said that he, for one, plans to be especially vigilant on issues of institutional racism and of ensuring wider opportunities for students in underserved communities.

On the night of his swearing-in, Miller noted that the district means far more to him than simply the diploma he earned as a student in its elementary, middle and high schools. He said he had “a true respect for the Long Beach Unified School District staff and supporting organizations who saw more in a 12-year-old Erik Miller than I saw in myself.”

Dreams of a bigger life

Miller grew up with his mom and

little sister in a two-bedroom apartment in a low-income neighborhood in Central Long Beach. Back then, his dad was out of the picture. Both grandparents on that side of the family, he says, were involved in drugs and prostitution.

Still, Miller says, he had a “strong village of family members” living nearby who cared for his sister and him while his mom often worked overtime at a phone company.

At Stanford Middle School, Miller was a “strong B” student but he also was on a slippery slope, hanging around kids who were tagging walls, using drugs and involved with gangs. His school counselor suggested that he break from this crowd and move in a new direction by joining Operation Jump Start, a mentorship program. Miller’s mom signed him up.

One day his mentor, a Long Beach dentist, took the nervous 12-year-old to USC for a tour and to experience his first college football game. On campus, he saw Black and Brown students and realized his life could be bigger.

“I recognized that these were young

men and young women that would eventually have pretty well-paying jobs, and some of them didn’t look too different from myself.”

At Millikan High School, where Miller was bused from a home his mom had bought in North Long Beach, he began to display his drive not only in the classroom but also on the football field. As a defensive end, he won honors as an all-league player.

After his graduation, Miller became the first member of his family to attend college and graduated with a degree in architectural design from Woodbury University. He worked for several years in a Los Angeles firm. But his heart remained back in his community.

“It wasn’t about making a dollar,” he says, “it was about making a difference.”

So with the support of his mom and dad, with whom he had reconnected, he quit and went to work for the mentorship program that had helped shape his life as a youngster. He would also take leadership positions in other non-profits focusing on veterans’ affairs and employment.

Operation Jump Start's chief executive, Irene Quevedo, worked alongside Miller, who became the organization's director of community relations. "I really saw him wanting to serve students with his whole heart," she says.

Quevedo says Miller was determined to expand access to Jump Start to at-risk students from Long Beach's most violent neighborhoods but whose grade point averages disqualified them from the program.

To that end, Miller created the Positive Futures Mentorship Program for students with GPAs as low as 2.0. Quevedo says the successful initiative lasted for three school years, until the organization received a \$100,000 grant to expand their other programming.

Quevedo says Miller had a winning way with the Jump Start's participants—approachable and down to earth.

"In a weird way, he'll put himself down to make you feel good. He'll make fun of his basketball skills or his big head," she says. "Erik just has this way about him to make someone shine."

An early stumble but no turning back

By 2016, Miller was ready for the political arena—even if the political arena wasn't quite ready for him.

Miller had decided to run against long-serving City Councilman Dee Andrews of the 6th District—a man Miller himself described at the time as "a legend." Gun violence, Miller says, was "the catalyst for me getting into that race."

But the upstart candidate didn't make it past the primary. Andrews got 51% of the vote, avoiding a general election runoff, while Miller received 26%. "I took a bet on myself," he says.

Still, the council election raised Miller's visibility and gave him a crash course in how to run a race, including the endorsement process, which turned out to be pivotal in his school board campaign.

First came the surprise non-endorsement of Reyes Uranga by the Long Beach Democratic Club—despite her work with the state Democratic party and her deep political connections. "I, early on, assumed that it was going to be a loss because I was like, 'They know Tonia.'"

But Miller says that after each candidate gave a 3-minute presentation on why they should be endorsed, the club could not reach a decision and opted to endorse no one.

"Political ties mean one thing, but it's the relationships and what you represent is what people are ultimately voting for," Miller says he learned from the experience.

The powerful Teachers Association of Long Beach, meanwhile, was not about to sit on the fence. It provided a crucial endorsement and more than \$291,000 in direct and in-kind contributions to Miller's campaign.

Executive Director Chris Callopy says the union admired Miller's background and believed his work with students, his personal experience as an LBUSD graduate and his passion for service made him the best qualified to represent the interests of all stakeholders.

Callopy says he hopes Miller will deliver on his campaign promises, including his vow to promote better communication between the district and families.

"Certainly I remain hopeful and optimistic," Callopy says. "But I'm also grounded enough to know that there's been numerous candidates who you've backed and they end up in that position that they just didn't turn out the way you would have liked."

As for Reyes Uranga, she offered these thoughts on Miller's election in a text message to the Post: "I am hopeful that he can be a strong voice for the community and parents that need support right now. TALB [the union] spent close to \$300,000 to get him elected and I hope he is worth the investment."

When policy becomes personal

Miller knows it's going to be a tough rookie season.

The district, like those around the country, is facing huge pandemic-related hurdles ranging from getting kids online to confronting a grim budget outlook. But he says he's confident that the new board, with its younger cohort, is poised to take a fresh look at these and other issues, especially those involving race and classism.

That emphasis on equity helped Miller land endorsements from LBUSD board members Juan Benitez, 48, and Megan Kerr, 46, who represent the panel's younger trend. After their endorsements, the rest of the board jumped on the bandwagon.

"I think that our philosophies align," Miller said about the younger board members.

For him, the stakes are particularly high. He and his wife plan on sending their daughter, who is 3, through the Long Beach schools, just like dad.

Miller says it's important for students to see leaders who look like them, who come from the same neighborhood, "who speak the language of your aunts and uncles and can break down barriers by understanding your plight."

"Every decision I make," he says, "will be with my daughter and her generation's best interest at heart." ■

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YMCA of Greater Long Beach is offering Y CAMP ACADEMY—an American Camp Association accredited day camp program created to support students and families with their distance learning and childcare needs. This in-person program supports students with their distance learning work provided by their school, alongside other enrichment

activities in a safe, clean, and fun environment to balance screen time with other important enrichment activities that include physical education, STEM programs, arts and crafts, and more. Y Camp Academy will combine fun and character-building activities within a strong educational support structure. Participants receive homework help and distance learning support during the time dedicated to school assignments both off and online. In collaboration with

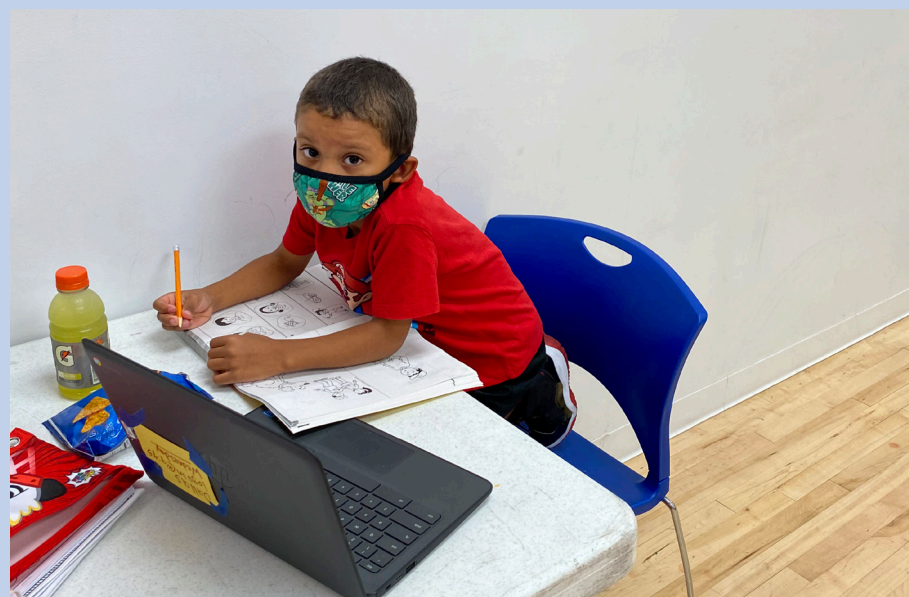
Long Beach Unified, ABC Unified, Bellflower Unified, and Paramount Unified School Districts, the Y is supporting distance learning through each district's virtual platforms.

Y Camp Academy makes children's health and safety our top priority by following all CDC and health department guidelines. Openings currently available at LBymca.org.

"As a single mother of four, the YMCA has been a great place for my children to gain experiences they

otherwise would not have been able to have if it weren't for the financial assistance the YMCA is able to provide. During this Covid-19 pandemic and the uncertainty of schools being in session, I would not have been able to continue working if it weren't for the Lakewood Y which has provided for my children a safe place to learn and grow."

-Valerie Gonzalez. Camp Academy parent ■



Children of Valerie Gonzalez, Dallas Ross (boy) and Brooklyn Ross (girl) at Lakewood Family Y Camp Academy

Q&A: LBUSD Superintendent Jill Baker on school reopenings, vaccines, summer school

■ By **MIKE GUARDABASCIO**
Correspondent

Note: This interview with Long Beach Unified School District Superintendent Jill Baker has been edited for clarity and length. It was conducted prior to the LBUSD winter break.

MIKE GUARDABASCIO: The LBUSD has said it plans to soon apply for a waiver from the Long Beach health department to begin allowing in-person school for kindergarten through second grade. Can you share more details about that?

JILL BAKER: We had actually done the preliminary work of collaborating with TALB (Teachers Association of Long Beach) prior to Thanksgiving. When the health conditions were looking like they were still heading in the right direction we were hopeful of bringing in small groups for TK-2. We had a good discussion with TALB and then had to halt the planning because we want to make a good common-sense decision.

There's a prediction that after Christmas and New Year's they're expecting a surge, which we're hoping calms down and gets us

into better health conditions towards the end of January.

We are looking at methods of starting by highest need in each Board [of Education] area. While our data says spread does not happen a lot between children, every place we put children has to have caring and qualified adults who do go back into households. So, even if we get a waiver, I want to dispel the idea that this will be like a light switch turning on. It's going to be methodical. A school in each board area would be five schools, which is different than all 52 schools with TK-2. We will proceed at first methodically before we further open.

MG: There's been a lot of discussion on social media that the district isn't planning on coming back for in-person learning this school year or that you're pretending you're going to while secretly knowing you won't. How committed are you to reopening schools?

JB: We are very determined to get students and families who want to come back in person back into school buildings. I'd underline very determined. We are also prepared for many families to not want to come back until there's widespread use of the vaccine. We're prepared for both. But it's very

important for us to get kids back into our buildings. The heart of our work is the interaction between students and teachers and students and their schools. Our teams have been incredible about doing what they can on the phone and via Zoom, but it does not replace the relevancy of what happens with a student and teacher or a counselor interacting in person.

MG: Where is the district with regard to testing teachers once schools reopen?

JB: We're exploring methods of making testing more readily available, specifically to ease the minds of adults who are coming into the building.

MG: Were you surprised that Los Alamitos Unified was able to keep its schools almost entirely open in the fall? I'd heard from some in the district who expected more closures when they announced they were reopening.

JB: I think at the early childhood level it hasn't been a surprise. The open/close is happening; sometimes it's at the classroom level so that's less of a news story than a whole campus closing. They're seeing what we're seeing. We have experience from March onwards of 1,600 kids with PPE receiving preschool or childcare services [in person at campuses]. We've had to respond to COVID spread almost exclusively among adults—we're seeing that it doesn't spread among kids on campus.

MG: What are your thoughts on the state- and county-level health departments' positions on keeping schools closed?

JB: One of the things we're talking about is that the tiered system was not designed to determine school operations. Part of our advocacy is around, "Is that the best way to make these decisions?"

MG: If you got the OK from the state to reopen, what stops you from opening campuses tomorrow?

JB: Nothing. Now, tomorrow? No. But Jan. 28, we were prepared for our hybrid model, and we'll be prepared for March 1. We have the PPE, our screening and protocols were set and are set. We've been reviewing those checklists with principals and custodial staff to refresh. I think there's an idea out there on social media that unions are holding this up and it's not true, it's the county and the state. There is a percentage of teachers who have health conditions that will prohibit them from coming in. We have a great workforce and we will probably have to make some decisions about how to manage those who make the decision not to come in.

On any given day, more than 55% of our teaching staff are teaching from the classroom right now. I've heard from plenty of teachers who can't wait to get back to teaching in person, and I sure hope that public appreciation for the importance of teachers and schools is a big part of our future in 2021.

MG: Will it be a requirement for kids to take the vaccine at any point?

JB: We are not at this time planning on



Jill Baker. Photo courtesy of Long Beach Unified School District.

requiring vaccines for kids unless the state makes that a requirement.

MG: You said in May there was no chance to try to avoid COVID-19 completely, that districts would have to figure out how to operate with it as part of the world. That has certainly proven to be true, but schools still are mostly closed, so how do they reopen with COVID-19 still present in our community?

JB: I'll stand by the idea that we're not trying to get back to 'normal,' we're trying to re-imagine our future with this. Every single person has been changed because of this experience, some more negatively than others. I still think that it is about management and about putting precautions in place to move forward because we've had success doing that with 1,600 kids who've been in buildings since all of this has happened. We now have some looks at how other districts are doing things successfully.

We also know that about 50% of the public is saying they're not sure they're going to take the vaccine. We can't wait for that; our children are losing ground right now, especially students of color. We are going to have to effectively manage knowing that there's some risk, but coming back into school buildings.

MG: What is that new future going to look like? What is the immediate fallout of this stage once kids are back on campus?

JB: I certainly want our community to know that I think the next phase of the conversations about bringing students back into school will center around what we can do to support them in that transition. We are going to come out in the next few weeks with plans for spring and summer which will look very different than they have in the past. We are thinking at each level about a different kind of learning experience in the summer to help them recover. There will be opportunities for our high school students to take a lot more courses (than are traditionally offered). We are also adding asynchronous days in January to help students and teachers get a break. ■



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Housing in 2021: Renters, landlords, prospective buyers are in for another year of uncertainty



Long Beach apartment residents gather around Norberto Lopez of Long Beach Residents Empowered, Tuesday Feb.18, 2020, after the city council closed a loophole to force landlords to pull work permits with the city before notifying tenants that they have to vacate their apartment for planned renovations. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

■ By **ALENA MASCHKE**
Senior Reporter

Even the long-awaited vaccine can't cure the COVID-19 symptoms the housing market is suffering. In fact, experts warn that without substantial relief programs in 2021, a surge in

homelessness could become a long-term effect of the pandemic in Long Beach and beyond.

For tenants, the looming expiration of county and state eviction moratoriums are generating anxiety about their unpaid rent and the future of the roofs over their heads. With rental relief pro-

grams stretched thin and months without additional unemployment benefits, some have fallen behind on their rent or other bills that will have to be paid eventually.

For landlords, this means they will likely be forced to pay ongoing expenses out of their own pockets, without

significant financial support from the government.

And for those hoping to escape the rental market altogether, they're likely to run up against record home prices, unlike during previous downturns. Low interest rates and a tight supply of available homes have kept the single-family real estate market hot, pricing out many prospective buyers.

And so, the housing market forges ahead into perilous waters.

Can a look to the past help predict the future?

Some may look to the Great Recession of 2008 for clues. But according to experts and market trends, that economic meltdown offers few lessons in combating the current pandemic-induced housing problems.

"There's some pretty stark differences," said Michael Lens, associate professor of urban planning and public policy at UCLA. "The Great Recession was so closely tied to the bottoming out of the housing market."

In other words: When it comes to the recession of 2008, the collapse of the housing market was part of the cause, rather than the effect.

As such, the Great Recession brought about a foreclosure crisis, which overshadowed the issue of evictions at the time. "That was an under-discussed problem happening under our noses," Lens said.

(Please Continue to Page 18)



A mother and daughter embrace at a rally denouncing tenant harassment at Harvey Milk Park on Friday, Oct. 9, 2020. Photo by Sebastian Echeverry.

(Continued from Page 17)

Because of the previous recession's root in the issuing of loans to people who would likely have difficulty repaying them, credit was hard to come by after the housing bubble burst in 2007.

Home prices dropped temporarily, allowing those who were cash-ready to make their dreams of homeownership a reality, while many homes were scooped up by corporations and turned into rental properties.

This time around, home prices have remained at an all-time high, offsetting the affordability gains provided by historically low mortgage rates. According to the California Association of Realtors' Affordability Index, the percentage of households that can afford to purchase the median priced home in LA County is lower than it was a year ago.

"Becoming a homeowner in Long Beach and LA County is a challenge under the best of circumstances," said Robert Kleinhenz, chief economist at Kleinhenz Economics and associate director of research at the Cal State Long Beach Office of Economic Research. Now, he added, "the supply of

homes went from already record lows to new record lows."

As a result, Kleinhenz added, "what we typically see in a recession is not necessarily going to play out in this economic cycle."

A housing crisis, continued

Meanwhile, renters, especially those with below-average incomes, will likely continue bearing the brunt of the pandemic's economic and housing impacts in the months ahead.

"Even before the pandemic, we all knew that we were in the middle of a housing crisis," said Norberto Lopez, program director of local tenant advocacy group Long Beach Residents Empowered.

A loss of income brought about by the pandemic has hit low-income families the hardest.

Those earning \$27,000 or less per year saw a 28% drop in employment between February and October in the Los Angeles metro area, compared to just 2% for higher earners. This was before new shutdowns in the hospitality and dining sector put even more low-income earners out of work.

Meanwhile, additional federal un-

employment benefits, which had cushioned the blow for some in the summer, expired on July 31. For undocumented workers, many of whom pay taxes through an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number, there was little to no assistance from official sources.

Relief programs such as the city's Long Beach Cares rental assistance initiative helped some tenants keep abreast of their bills, but the program quickly ran out of money. Out of 2,400 applications, only 1,770 were selected through the city's lottery system. No plans for a new round of funding for the program have been announced.

"People's biggest concern right now is: How do I pay my rent," Lopez said, "so my kids don't end up on the street."

In the long run, Lopez said, the creation of more affordable units is the only way out of the crisis. In the short term, he said he hopes additional financial assistance for tenants and mom-and-pop landlords will prevent rent debt from accumulating further.

To prevent mass evictions, a sharp increase in homelessness and the loss of affordable housing stock as a result of the pandemic, experts agree that forceful steps must be taken. Those in-

clude extending the county's eviction moratorium—which expires on Feb. 28 and currently offers the most comprehensive protections for Long Beach tenants.

Earlier this month, California Gov. Gavin Newsom urged local jurisdictions to extend their moratoriums and said rapid-relief checks of \$600 would be distributed to roughly four million low-income Californians, including undocumented households that file taxes with an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number.

This comes in addition to California's \$2.6 billion share of federal rental assistance targeting tenants and small property owners.

That financial help is desperately needed, advocates on both sides of the tenant-landlord relationship argue.

"There needs to be more assistance to help housing providers and tenants maintain their businesses and their homes," said Fred Sutton, senior vice president of public affairs at the California Apartment Association.

Lens, of UCLA, agreed. "There needs to be buckets of money to make up for this or people are eventually going to be out on the street," he said. ■

A focus on small business investment as Long Beach begins to recover from COVID pandemic

■ By **JASON RUIZ**
Staff Reporter

A year ago the newly founded Long Beach Economic Partnership was having its first meeting with Mayor Robert Garcia, unveiling its plan to leverage the city's economic cornerstones and a city-wide marketing campaign into growth.

Then the pandemic hit.

"We all responded right away," said LBEP Chairman Randal Hernandez. "It was 'What can we do to assist and respond right now?'"

Hernandez chairs the nonprofit that came out of the ashes of the Downtown Development Corporation. Its board includes representatives from banking, medical, education, tech and construction industries as well as city representatives and local business improvement district heads.

The idea of the partnership was to be a job generator, helping to draw in businesses, sometimes acting as a concierge for the city or even an initial point of contact for those entertaining an expansion into the city, but not quite ready to make the trip to City Hall.

Being a conduit for business growth is still in the cards, but the group's focus going into 2021, in large part, will be helping the city navigate the economic wreckage inflicted by COVID-19.

A starting point will be getting more adherence to some of the things that have helped some businesses be more

successful than others during the uncertain economic environment.

Technology infrastructure is going to be key, Hernandez said, all the way from getting small retailers set up to take contactless payments to ensuring that the digital divide in the city—an estimated 20% of residents lack an internet connection—is erased by getting more fiber optics into the ground, and more businesses connected to it.

"When everyone was chasing Amazon HQ the big question was how much fiber do you have in the ground?" Hernandez said, while adding that there's more infrastructure in the ground in the city than most people realize.

Hernandez said the partnership never envisioned being as involved with small business development then it likely will be in the next 12 to 24 months, a critical window of recovery for the local economy. But supporting small businesses became an immediate need in the face of the pandemic's closures that ravaged minority-owned businesses in particular.

In 2020 the group was able to partner with Prologis to fund a number of revitalization projects on the Santa Fe Corridor on the city's Westside. Hernandez said about 70 businesses have reached out for improvements and signage needs, a number of which are expected to be completed by February.

The program also included a community garden, a mural with a second



Long Beach Economic Partnership Board of Directors Chairman Randal Hernandez said the organization's focus this year is on helping small businesses navigate the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic through technology such as Apple Pay and better-functioning websites. Courtesy photo.

one under discussion, as well as 16 new trees being planted.

"We envision this 'Community Benefit Program' will be a model for other developers who have invested in the City and also want to enhance their community," Hernandez said in an email.

While there is much work to do in both retaining and nurturing current

businesses and attracting new entities to the city, Hernandez said he's looking forward to one thing in particular: getting off of Zoom.

"All of us being in a room together finally," Hernandez said. "To be able to look across the table and have that robust conversation." ■



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Economic Outlook: Long Beach's largest industries' hopes hinge on coronavirus vaccine distribution

■ By **ALENA MASCHKE**
Senior Reporter

The coronavirus has throttled the local economy, and experts say the city's short- and long-term financial health will depend on large-scale vaccinations—a process that is beginning now.

"We are definitely on the recovery path, but we are far from fully recovered," said Seiji Steinmetz, chair of the Cal State Long Beach economics department. "We have some sectors that have recovered pretty well, while others still suffer."

Face-to-face interactions are key for many businesses, and restrictions on in-person services are likely to continue until daily case numbers and ICU utilization drop significantly, making the vaccination rollout the determining factor in the local economy this year.

This is especially true for the city's hotels, bars and restaurants, as well as

the Long Beach Convention Center—all of which are critical industries to the Long Beach economy.

Leisure & Hospitality

"It will all depend on the success of the vaccination program," said Steve Goodling, president and CEO of the Long Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau, who is hoping that the center will be able to reopen for in-person programming between June and September. But, he added, "this year will still be a slow start."

Goodling hopes that individual visitors will be able to return to Long Beach earlier than that, providing a kickstart to the currently dormant leisure and hospitality sector.

"That's what will help in reactivating our hotels and restaurants around our hotels," he said.

Once restrictions on hotels, restaurants and bars are lifted, pent up demand will help make up for some of the revenues lost during the pandemic,

economists and business owners project.

"We think there's going to be a big surge of people wanting to go out," said Ciaran Gough, president of the recently founded Long Beach Restaurant Association.

Steinmetz agreed that pent up demand would likely revive this important sector of the Long Beach economy once vaccinations have reached a large enough portion of the population that restrictions could be lifted and people feel comfortable traveling and going out again.

"Particularly the higher-income workers would go out there and spend more, stimulating the need to get all the jobs back for the lower income workers," he said.

Health Care

For Long Beach's largest economic sector, health care, limitations on in-person care and the cost of supplies related to the pandemic have also brought on financial challenges, especially in hospitals.

While expenses for personal protective equipment and lab testing increased, revenue dropped as fewer patients sought in-patient care. Long Beach Memorial recently halted elective surgeries—a major source of revenue—temporarily, in response to the current surge in coronavirus patients.

"Our margins are driven by elective procedures," said John Bishop, CEO of MemorialCare's Miller Children's & Women's Hospital Long Beach and Long Beach Medical Center. "It's a very significant impact for us."

The federal CARES Act has been instrumental in keeping many health care businesses afloat during the pandemic. In total, Long Beach health care providers received \$142 million from the CARES Act Provider Relief Fund.

While in-person patient care has been more limited during the pandemic, the use of telehealth—such as virtual visits with physicians—has grown and changes to insurance companies' reimbursement policies have made it a more attractive option for health care providers and patients.

Even beyond the pandemic, "we're hopeful that that will continue," Bishop said.

Education

Two of Long Beach's largest employers, the Long Beach Unified School District and Cal State Long Beach, also had to embrace video con-

ferencing this past year. Aside from being an organizational challenge, this also led to unexpected costs for technology and training, in addition to reductions in state funding and on-campus revenues.

This year's financial outlook, however, is looking more promising.

The budgets of both institutions are closely tied to Gov. Gavin Newsom's budget proposal to the state legislature, which was released earlier this month. It provides some insights into the state's allocations for the upcoming fiscal year, although the final amount won't be decided until the budget has been approved by the state Legislature.

The chief financial officers of both institutions said the proposed allocations exceeded their expectations, especially given the financial pressures of the previous year and the uncertainty ahead.

Both LBUSD and Cal State Long Beach suffered significant budget cuts in the current fiscal year. They both instated a hiring freeze as a result, and have dug into their reserves.

In the case of LBUSD, the district cut its budget by \$71.8 million, Cal State Long Beach made a \$19 million budget cut. Employees are the biggest cost factor for both institutions, which have 12,000 and 8,000 employees, respectively.

"This year was tough," CSULB Chief Financial Officer Scott Apel said, summarizing the current fiscal year, which ends on June 30. But between the proposed state allocations, the new federal coronavirus relief bill and the prospect of students returning to campus in the fall, the upcoming fiscal year is shaping up much better, he said.

The school's four auxiliary organizations, which operate as nonprofits and have their own separate budgets, also suffered some financial losses as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

Those losses have been concentrated in the Forty-Niner Shops auxiliary, which operates book stores and dining halls on campus. "It's in the most precarious position of all our operating units," said Apel. "They're just losing money hand over fist. And it's not just us, all universities are having this problem right now."

The massive loss of student employment as a result of the school's fiscal constraints also has consequences for the city's overall wellbeing.

"We push a lot of money into the local economy by paying students and students going out to spend that mon-

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Medical staff triage patients outside the emergency room of St. Mary Medical Center, Monday, Dec. 14, 2020. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

ey,” Apel said. “We need our students to come back.”

What can be done in the meantime?

According to CSULB’s Steinmetz, the good news is that Long Beach’s productive capacity remains intact, albeit paused for some sectors. “There’s

nothing wrong with our productive infrastructure,” Steinmetz said. “It’s just a matter of people being comfortable to get back out there and resume their normal lives.”

Until then, the challenge will be to hold over workers in the most heavily affected sectors of the Long Beach economy until widespread vaccina-

tions and increased consumer confidence allow them to return to work, he said.

“We have a very skilled, knowledgeable and hard-working labor force,” Steinmetz said. “Anytime that’s damaged, it hurts our economic activity.”

Rent relief, food drives—any pro-

grams or policies that allow those who have temporarily lost their jobs to stay in town—will ensure the city’s economic strength going forward. “That’s the best we can do: Keep the discussion going, keep the policy ideas circulating and keep looking for ways to help,” he said. ■



Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many Long Beach families are struggling right now. Here’s how you can help.

LBCEI’s Food Support Network is seeking donations of food and household items every Monday from 10am-2pm.



Visit LBCEI.org/Give today for a list of items needed and drop-off location.



The Queen Mary has been closed to the public since May 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic. Now, the operator has filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

Queen Mary

(Continued from Page 1)

said, adding that the city should know more in the coming weeks.

“We’re going to do everything we need to protect our interest and the public’s interest in keeping the ship in good shape and make sure the lease is fulfilled,” Modica said.

Long Beach could take legal action if Eagle does not meet its lease obligations. The City Council is expected to discuss options in an open meeting in February.

While the hospitality industry has been ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic, Eagle Hospitality showed signs of problems in 2019 before the pandemic, including a \$341 million default on a loan from Bank of America.

Problems for Urban Commons

The bankruptcy is the latest of problems for the Queen Mary since former operator Urban Commons, a Los Angeles-based real estate investment firm, signed a 66-year lease to run the ship in 2016.

In 2019, Urban Commons created Eagle Hospitality as a real estate investment trust to list on the Singapore Stock Exchange, with the goal of raising millions for a massive development project called Queen Mary Island.

But the company hit tensions with the board of Eagle Hospitality and its shareholders when it didn’t fulfill financial obligations and repeatedly failed to pay rent for its portfolio of hotel properties. The problems culminated in September, when Eagle Hospitality’s managers terminated the master lease agreements for Urban Commons’

hotels, including the Queen Mary—a move that essentially removed Urban Commons as the Queen Mary’s operator.

Urban Commons is now in legal disputes with Eagle Hospitality, according to court records. In a statement this week, Urban Commons said it has been meeting its financial obligations to Eagle Hospitality and that its lease agreements include clauses to forgive rent payments during a pandemic like COVID-19.

“We have done everything in our power to unite during these uncertain times, and work together amicably to facilitate the best chance of survival and success,” the company said. “While COVID-19 has hit our properties hard, we are not the scapegoat for its effects, yet these claims against us began only after the onset of the pandemic.”

Problems have also mounted for Urban Commons’ head principals Taylor Woods and Howard Wu. In September, it was revealed that Woods improperly applied for a more than \$2 million federal Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan for the Queen Mary without first notifying the managers for Eagle Hospitality.

Woods has said it was a clerical mistake, but the issue has not yet been resolved, according to bankruptcy court filings.

In the court documents, Alan Tantleff, chief restructuring officer for the debtors, said the incident “matches a pattern of behavior in which Woods and Wu” have used the Queen Mary entity to benefit Urban Commons in a way that leaves it with “liability that they should never have incurred.”

The documents also note that debtors are investigating the connection between Woods and Wu and a business

entity called Lodging USA, which has the largest lender claim in the bankruptcy for a disputed loan of \$89 million.

Keeping up the ship

One of the city’s biggest concerns remains the repairs and maintenance for the aging Queen Mary.

A city-commissioned marine survey in 2015 projected costs of up to \$289 million for urgent repairs over the next several years. Under its original agreement with Urban Commons, the city issued \$23 million in bonds to fix some of the most critical repairs listed in the marine survey, but many of the repairs went over budget and the \$23 million was spent before other critical projects could be addressed.

The city later fired its longtime Queen Mary inspector Ed Pribonic after he issued a string of critical reports on the ship’s condition and criticized Urban Commons for allegedly neglecting the ship.

Long Beach City Auditor Laura Doud is currently conducting an audit on how the \$23 million was spent. City officials, however, say they have documentation for the approved work.

“We absolutely got \$23 million of repairs done that needed to be done,” Long Beach Economic Development Director John Keisler said. “The ship is in better shape than it’s been in decades.”

Keisler said the Queen Mary hasn’t needed major maintenance because the ship and its hotel have been closed since May due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Future money for repair projects is also in limbo as the projects are largely funded by passenger fees from the nearby Carnival Cruise terminal, which has remained closed due to the pandemic.

Nonetheless, Keisler said Eagle

Hospitality has expressed its commitment to repairing the ship and remains obligated under the lease agreement.

Hope for Queen Mary Island

Long Beach has seen an unfortunate history of operators who have failed to maintain the ship and struggled to make a profit.

Among the failed operators, Joe Prevratil, who signed a lease to run the ship in 1993, filed for bankruptcy in 2006 when the city demanded several million dollars in unpaid rent. Save the Queen LLC purchased the lease through an auction at bankruptcy and then defaulted on its loan in 2009.

While the city has struggled with operators, Modica said using an operator is still the best option. Under the lease agreement, the operator generates funds to maintain the Queen Mary through its events, hotel and Carnival passenger fees. He said the city does not use taxpayer funds to maintain the ship.

“The other option would have been we just take over the Queen Mary and put public taxpayer dollars in the ship, which has never been our intent to run the ship that way,” Modica said.

Urban Commons bought the lease out by default in 2016 with the greater prospect of developing the surrounding 65 acres into a \$250 million entertainment destination known as Queen Mary Island.

Urban Commons at the time had a portfolio of 18 hotels across the country, but it had no direct experience in a massive development project on the scale of Queen Mary Island.

City leaders, however, were hopeful since the company had an impressive portfolio of hotels and brought in big-name designers and architect firms, like Gensler, for its proposal, Modica said. The company had also generated funding from credible lenders and seemed prepared to bring in investors, Modica said, adding that Long Beach has seen other successful public-private partnerships, like the city’s newly built Civic Center.

“We did do some vetting at the time and the team looked like they were able to do this,” he said. “We would not have moved forward if we hadn’t felt that way.”

Modica said the Queen Mary’s future is tied to developing the surrounding waterfront, which will generate revenue. But that also remains one of the biggest challenges as the area faces tougher environmental regulations and is harder to access for visitors.

Under the lease agreement, Eagle Hospitality is now obligated to develop the land, but if Eagle drops out, Keisler said he’s optimistic that another Queen Mary suitor will see the potential.

“The reason they’re willing to take this on is because of the opportunity for real estate development on the waterfront of Southern California,” Keisler said. “And we think we’ll get it, either with this group or another group depending on the outcome of these next few weeks.” ■

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