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In This Issue



Carnival cruises to resume in August
(Page 2)



The aquarium goes viral on TikTok
(Page 12)



Controversial rail project is back
(Page 18)



A look at aquarium CEO's first year
(Page 11)

'We survived': Aquarium of the Pacific expects to clear all financial hurdles brought on by coronavirus this year



A child watches penguins with her dad at the Aquarium of the Pacific, Thursday, June 17, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

■ By **BRANDON RICHARDSON**
Reporter

Children squeal with delight as playful sea otters swim along the glass of their indoor exhibit at the Aquarium of the Pacific. In another room, kids are mesmerized by various jellyfish species floating in their tanks, some with long tentacles gently swaying in the water. Others watch frogs and fish and crabs with wonder.

For most of the last 15 months, guests were relegated to the aquarium's outdoor exhibits due to strict COVID-19 rules, causing the facility to fall short of its projected revenues by millions of dollars in 2020. But thanks to pent-up demand, the tourist attraction is on pace to finish this year in the black while rebuilding

its reserve funds, according to CFO Anthony Brown.

"I don't want to jinx anything but it seems like the financial hardships of the last 15 months will more or less be resolved by the end of this fiscal year," Brown said. "If the worst of the pandemic is behind us, we survived."

For 2020, the aquarium's budget projected \$41.1 million in revenues and \$38.5 million in expenses, for a net earnings of \$2.6 million. But only being fully open for 91 days last year had a severe impact on the facility's pocketbook, resulting in the aquarium closing out the year with \$13 million in losses despite curtailing expenses by over \$9 million, Brown said.

Last year's budget projected 1.66 million people would visit the aquarium, a target

that was missed by 66% with only 568,000 guests walking through the doors all year, Brown said.

The aquarium did score \$3.3 million through the federal Payroll Protection Program, which helped offset losses but is currently on the books as a liability, Brown said. However, on June 18, Brown said the aquarium received word that the PPP loan, which has already been spent in full, is to be fully forgiven.

The aquarium also was awarded a \$25,000 relief grant from the state and has applied for a Shuttered Venue Operators grant through the U.S. Small Business Administration. Originally meant for concert venues and theaters, Brown said the museum com-

(Please Continue to Page 17)

Westside residential development ban aims to save space for businesses

■ By **JASON RUIZ**
Reporter

A recent emergency ordinance will block the city from issuing new residential building permits along two corridors in West Long Beach in an attempt to save space to attract neighborhood-serving businesses to the area.

The Santa Fe Corridor, which runs from Pacific Coast Highway to Wardlow Road, and the Willow Street Corridor that runs from the 710 Freeway west to the city's boundary with Wilmington, will not be eligible for new residential construction for at least the next year after the City Council approved the ordinance June 15.

Councilman Roberto Uranga, who represents the area and made the request, said the existing zoning in those areas is not aligned with the city's Land Use Element that was adopted by the City Council in 2018.

Uranga said that the continued development of single-family housing along the two corridors that were identified as "neighborhood serving" in the Land Use Element is undermining the area's ability to attract businesses, something it sorely needs.

"West Long Beach does not have a banking institution, a pharmacy, or even a popular coffee shop," Uranga said in an email. "Residents must traverse the Long Beach Freeway and the Los Angeles River to visit these businesses and frankly, they shouldn't have to go to these lengths."

Uranga's request will push his district to the front of the line of a process that city staff was already undertaking in order to align old zoning with the city's new vision for future development.

Chris Koontz, deputy director
(Please Continue to Page 22)

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PUBLISHER David Sommers
MANAGING EDITOR Melissa Evans
ADVERTISING DIRECTOR Andrea Estrada
DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS Dennis Dean
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EDITOR Stephanie Rivera
COLUMNIST Tim Grobaty
VISUALS EDITORS Brandon Richardson & Thomas Cordova
REPORTERS Alena Maschke, Brandon Richardson, Jason Ruiz, Kelly Puente, Sebastian Ech- every, Crystal Niebla, Cheantay Jensen, Anthony Pignataro
GRAPHIC DESIGNER Springwave Studios

PUBLISHER EMERITUS George Economides
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Carnival to resume cruises out of Long Beach for vaccinated passengers



Carnival Cruise Line's Panorama sits docked in Long Beach, Thursday, June 10, 2021. No paying customer has stepped aboard since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

By BRANDON RICHARDSON Reporter
After being anchored for 16 months, Carnival Cruise Line announced the return of cruises from its ports around the country beginning in July, including the return of service out of Long Beach in August for vaccinated passengers.
The Panorama, one of Carnival's newest and largest ships, will begin sailing seven-day Mexican Riviera routes out of its Long Beach homeport on Aug. 21, the company recently announced. The Miracle, which debuted in 2004, is expected to begin its short cruise program out of Long Beach in September after it spends the summer sailing a Seattle-Alaska route beginning July 27, Carnival spokesman Vance Gulliksen said in an email.
The Radiance, a newly renovated vessel formerly known as the Victory, is slated to make its Long Beach debut in November, Gulliksen said, and will sail three- and four-day Baja routes.
The company is onboarding hundreds of crew members each week, according to the announcement. Before each member can begin work preparing for guests, they must be vaccinated and complete a quarantine mandated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the company added.
"Our focus remains on the health and safety of our guests, crew and the communities we serve and visit," President Christine Duffy said in the announcement. "We are taking a deliberate approach so we can ex- cute with excellence and deliver a fun experience to our guests, who have been tremendously patient and supportive throughout this pause."
Aside from proof of vaccination, other COVID-19 safety protocols remain in place for passengers. Each passenger will complete an online health questionnaire 72 hours before sailing and will undergo an enhanced health screening prior to boarding.
Face masks will be required during the entire embarkation and debarkation processes and all guests should be prepared to follow local guidelines at each stop. Onboard the ship, meanwhile, masks and social distancing are not required.
The pandemic wreaked havoc on Carnival Corporation, which includes Carnival Cruise Line and nine other brands. The company reported losses to the tune of \$10.24 billion—an average of nearly \$28.1 million per day—in 2020.
During the first three months of 2021, the company reported a net loss of another \$2 billion, according to its quarterly update. However, advanced bookings for 2022 are ahead of 2019 levels, which were very strong, the company noted.
The company is retiring 19 ships, including four from Carnival Cruise Line, Gulliksen said, adding that newer, more efficient ships that run on liquefied natural gas are on order. It was not immediately clear if any or all of the ships are being retired as a direct result of the pandemic or how many ships the company has ordered.

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Unemployment remains high in Long Beach, but economists are optimistic about future

■ By **BRANDON RICHARDSON**
Reporter

Long Beach's more than 11% unemployment rate remains well above the regional and national rates as the city and state re-open, thanks largely to its high dependence on the leisure and hospitality field, which is still seeing a shortage of employees returning to work, local economists said during a recent forum.

In California, 48% of jobs lost during the pandemic have been recovered, compared to 66% nationwide, economist Robert Kleinhenz said during the Accelerate Long Beach event on June 17, which focused on the city's burgeoning aerospace industry.

Prior to the pandemic, national unemployment was 3.5% but shutdowns caused a jump to 14.8%. Unemployment is now at 5.8% and is expected to fall below 5% by the end of the year, Kleinhenz said.

Unemployment in Los Angeles County is down to 8.3% from a peak of 16% amid the pandemic, Kleinhenz said. Prior to COVID-19, the county unemployment rate was about 4%. The county has recovered about 40% of the 2.7 million jobs lost as a result of the pandemic, in large part due to the number of jobs related to tourism and hospitality and entertainment, Kleinhenz said.

Long Beach unemployment is 11.5%, according to Cal State Long Beach Department of Economics Chair Seiji Steimetz, and unemployment claims remain three times their normal level, with more than 5,700 new claims filed in May.

"The state is moving in the right direction but moving more slowly than the U.S. because we've been more restrictive," Kleinhenz said, adding that after the "re-opening" Tuesday, the state should make substantial job gains in the coming weeks and months.

In 2020, GDP decreased 3.5%, but Kleinhenz said the country is expecting 6.5% and 4.4% growth this year and in 2022, respectively, with GDP reaching its previous trajectory around this time next year. The economists said consumers are playing a major role in gross domestic product recovery, which suffered its most drastic decrease since 1940. National GDP is growing at the fastest pace in 35 years, Kleinhenz said.

Consumers are playing a leading role in gross domestic product recovery, the economists said. Kleinhenz said sales for services have not yet rebounded but consumer goods sales continue to prop up the economy. However, for the first time in 100 years, the state population decreased, Kleinhenz said, noting a decreased number of births and international in-migration, which typically offsets any out-migration.

Gender inequalities are apparent in unemployment data, Steimetz said, citing the fact that unemployment claims by women are 3.7 times higher than normal, while claims by men are 2.9 times higher. The



From left, economist Robert Kleinhenz and Cal State Long Beach Department of Economics Chair Seiji Steimetz at the Accelerate Long Beach quarterly economic forum on Thursday, June 17. Screenshot.

economists said the main reason is more women left the labor force to care for their children when school shifted online and childcare options disappeared.

In terms of industries, tourism and hospitality across the country bore the brunt of the impact from the pandemic, Kleinhenz and Steimetz said. Because of the sector's sharp decline in employment, hospitality and tourism is leading the way in job gains locally and across the country—particularly in Long Beach and the rest of LA County—but still has a long way to go before reaching pre-pandemic levels.

Small businesses are struggling to recover, Steimetz said, adding that many are having difficulty finding staff to come back to work for the wages being offered.

"The backbone of Long Beach's economy is small businesses," Steimetz said.

Though challenges remain and the pace of recovery may not be as fast as many would hope, both economists said they are cautiously optimistic about the local, regional and national recoveries in the coming months.

Space sector

The forum was hosted by the Long Beach Economic Partnership and sponsored by Boeing, one of the city's longest-standing and most prominent aerospace firms. The event highlighted Long Beach's space sector, which is playing a key role in the city's economic recovery coming out of the pandemic.

Long Beach's space sector has been rapidly expanding since 2015, when Virgin Galactic leased a building in the Douglas Park industrial park. The company shifted its Long Beach operation to become a new branch—Virgin Orbit. Since then, Virgin

has expanded its footprint in the city and has been joined by SpinLaunch, Rocket Lab, Relativity Space and Morf3D.

"The amount of aerospace talent in the area is unmatched," Virgin Orbit President and CEO Dan Hart said during the event. "Space systems really bond the whole globe together and make us a more efficient species."

Hart said the company will be providing small satellite launch services around the world using its LauncherOne system that is made at the company's Long Beach headquarters. Steimetz said these traded industries are important to the local economy, noting that they bring in money from outside the area, while simultaneously bringing in workers who will spend at local businesses.

The number of Long Beach aerospace jobs is less than half what it was in 2008 but has increased 48% since 2018, Steimetz said. Today, there are an estimated 6,500 aerospace and aerospace-related jobs in the city.

"People are under the impression that aerospace disappeared from Long Beach," Steimetz said. "It declined but is strong and bouncing back."

During a discussion led by Long Beach Post and Long Beach Business Journal Publisher David Sommers, panelists from three local space-related firms talked about the appeal of the city for the sector. GXO Inc. founder and CEO Mandy Vaughn said Long Beach is a "sweet spot" for companies looking to scale quickly, in large part because of the talent pool from the university and the city's decades-long history of being home to aerospace companies.

Dan Abir, director of sales and marketing for M4 Engineering agreed, said his

company works with schools from middle school through college—especially robotics and rocketry clubs—to foster interest in the industry early on.

"If we can expose students, we're able to grow interest from a young age and expose them to technology and what can be done," Abir said.

In addition to the talent pool, Rocket Lab Senior Vice President Lars Hoffman said Long Beach is ideal for companies logistically. Most of the city's larger space firms are a stone's throw from the Long Beach Airport and amenities such as the Long Beach Exchange retail center, Hoffman noted.

The sector has changed drastically in the last 15 years, Hoffman said, including the government's shift from a buyer of hardware to a buyer of services. The fact that companies are treating the government similarly to their commercial customers—a model for which SpaceX has been a trailblazer—has spurred growth and innovation in the space sector, Hoffman said.

Because of that shift, Long Beach's proximity to the Los Angeles Air Force Base is also a major selling point for space companies to be located in the city and surrounding areas, Vaughn said. The United States Space Force is increasing its presence at the base and the federal government recently approved a 13% increase to the branch's research and development budget, which could mean more money for Long Beach space companies, Vaughn said. The base is a center of government procurement, with staff on site managing \$9 billion worth of contracts and grant funding per year, she added.

"It's an exciting time for the industry," Hoffman said. ■

After year in survival mode—including making sanitizer—Cal Heights distillery set to reopen

■ By CRYSTAL NIEBLA
Reporter

The crew at Wille's Tin Shop installed new shelves to hold bottles and repaired bar stools in preparation to reopen this month, along with preparing for the debut of a new vodka—and the opening of a new tropical bar.

This all happened on Tuesday, June 15—the day businesses across California were allowed to operate without capacity limits after the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on daily operations and routines across the state.

Head distiller Forrest Cokely said they're also reopening with the addition of four rescue cats—hired guns to fend off pesky rats attracted to the grains they use when distilling liquor.

Part of the work to reopen involved converting an adjoining distillery, Wille's Tin Shop, back to its original purpose of making alcohol for consumption, rather than for hand sanitizer. The business, like others, had to get creative to survive a year like no other.

The distillery made about 2,000 gallons of sprayable sanitizer the past year, which it mostly sold in bulk to clients including Long Beach City College, UPS, hospitals and local organizations.

"It helped us pay the bills," owner Robert Molina said. "It was a win-win for everybody."

Wille's Tin Shop didn't need to do much to its space to switch back to distill-



Robert Molina, left, and Forrest Cokely hold bottles of their self-made liquors and hand sanitizers inside Wille's Tin Shop on Wednesday, June 2, 2021. Photo by Crystal Niebla.

ing liquor for drinking, though the process is more time-consuming for alcohol be-

cause it requires slow distilling and taste testing.

The distillers also plan to debut a flavored vodka made from one of the last batches of strawberries—about 1,000 pounds—from the West Long Beach-based Ramirez Strawberry Ranch, which closed at the end of May. The debut of the vodka is just pending the drink's label approval, said Cokely.

Rigoberto Ramirez Jr., who managed the ranch after his father died, said Molina reached out a few months back to use the strawberries in their drink in honor of his father.

"It's nice to kind of memorialize him," Ramirez said.

In addition to that, Molina said that he's almost ready to debut Marie's Tek-Tec, an outdoor tropical bar behind Roxanne's. The bar has been in the works for years.

All he needs now, he said, is to hire about four staff members. Currently, he has about 20 workers, as some who were furloughed did not return.

Molina said that Marie's Tek-Tec will be adding a few more decorations, including an animatronic monkey at the bar.

"It's a tropical scene," he said, adding that it'd be indigenous-influenced. "Things like Olmec, Toltec, Amazonian, Mayan."

The two Long Beach distilleries stopped producing hand sanitizer when shortages calmed, and still had some leftover bottles. Cokely said they used some of the roughly five cases left to sanitize the bar.

"We've been working on these projects," Molina said, "and we can't wait." ■



One of the original signs from Wille's Tin Shop metalworking company hangs behind a fermenting tank at the grand opening of the distillery of the same name Dec. 5 in Long Beach. Debbie King, the last owner of the metalworking company, sold the name to Robert Molina for use with the distillery. The backward W on the sign has become one of the central branding marks for the distillery. File photo.

County supervisors extend eviction moratorium through September, but could require tenants to prove hardship

■ By **JASON RUIZ**
Reporter

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday, June 22, unanimously approved a three-month extension of a countywide moratorium on evictions that could protect tens of thousands of residents from being evicted due to inability to pay their rent during the pandemic.

Renters will now be protected by the county moratorium through the end of September, with supervisors expressing hope that more people will be able to apply for assistance programs that can cover unpaid rent that was accrued during the pandemic. The motion was proposed by supervisors Sheila Kuehl and Hilda Solis.

However, supervisors said that this is likely to be the last time the moratorium will be accepted.

The vote comes one day after the Associated Press reported that Gov. Gavin Newsom was meeting privately with state legislative leaders

to discuss a potential extension of a state ban on evictions for those who were unable to pay their rents during the past 15 months, with a potential for the state to cover the full debt rather than the 80% previously proposed.

"I know the state is contemplating some changes, but they're not going to put them in tomorrow," Kuehl said.

Supervisors took turns criticizing the slow rollout of the state's program that has over \$5.2 billion in available funds for local municipalities to distribute but has only given out just about \$32 million to date, according to Supervisor Holly Mitchell.

Mitchell said that she wants to make sure that relief gets to tenants and landlords, both of whom have suffered financially during the pandemic.

"One thing is for certain that we must insist that the state expedite delivery of that program," Mitchell said. "That should be our preferred strategy."

An amendment from Supervisor Janice Hahn, who represents Long Beach, added a request for the county's legal counsel to report back to the board in 30 days on the feasibility and impact of requiring tenants to document they've been affected financially by the pandemic, and to show a good faith effort to apply for rental assistance programs in order to have continued protection from eviction.

"I think this is balanced, it shows we're protecting tenants but we're also trying to look out for the landlords and the property owners," Hahn said.

A second report from the county's legal counsel is due in 60 days and will look at the feasibility of requiring landlords to apply for the same programs before taking legal action against tenants.

Long Beach has its own rent assistance program and extended the deadline to apply for it through July 11. Applicants have to be at or below 80% of the area median income, have

one or more individuals who experienced financial hardship due to the pandemic and one or more persons in the household who can prove risk of housing instability.

The city's program has over \$51 million available for eligible tenants.

While the extension will provide a few more months of protection for most renters it could be the beginning of a phasing out of the moratorium. One protection that is being peeled back is the prohibition of property owners moving in family members to units occupied by other tenants.

Now property owners can move family members into units that are occupied by persons who were not financially affected by the pandemic if the person being replaced is similar in circumstances to the person moving in, meaning they'd have to be relatively the same age, socioeconomic class and be in similar states of health. ■

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Your home has a history; HouStories will tell you what it is

■ By **TIM GROBATY**
Columnist

The secret lives of houses is what captures Maureen Neeley's interest. Whether you know it or not, your house has its own history, even if it's just a regular tract home and you're only its second or third owner.

Neeley specializes in digging into a residence's past, and it's not often an easy task. You don't just Google your address and immediately print out your own house's biography.

There's more you can discover if you cast a wider net and employ more tools of the house history trade: What was on the land before your house was built? Was it part of some other town or township, such as Alamitos Beach, Zaferia, or Virginia City before Long Beach annexed it? Was it a sprawling sugar beet field? A part of a historic rancho? Is it in a tract that is built on reclaimed marshland? Is there a story behind the name of your street? Do you know how your street got its name? What do you know about its architect or its architecture?

These are all part of the history of your house and they're questions that interest Neeley, a librarian/historian who runs HouStories, providing stories and histories behind the homes and neighborhoods of homeowners and businesses.

Neeley, a resident of Belmont Heights, has a host of research tools at her disposal, as well as a bachelor's degree in history from Gonzaga University, and a master's in library and information studies from UC Berkeley.

Some of the tools she uses in providing histories of more than 400 properties are fairly common, such as newspaper archives, old city directories (which are marvels in their own right, providing more than just phone numbers of people in town, but



Maureen Neeley of HouStories with the old Long Beach City Hall behind her, Tuesday, June 2, 2021. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

also individuals' occupations and spouse names as well as cross-referencing street addresses), heritage sites like Ancestry.com and various historical archives housed at colleges and universities.

"My main clients are people who have moved to Long Beach and want to know more about their home," said Neeley.

The COVID pandemic that crippled many businesses, didn't hurt HouStories at all, she said. "People were at home and just looking at their house and becoming curious about its past."

A good portion of Neeley's clients come from the history-rich neighborhoods of Bluff Park, Bluff Heights, California Heights, Naples and Carroll Park.

There are, of course, stories about homes being haunted by ghosts. Some good, some falling into the ghostly cliché of being merely scary.

"I had a house whose owners said was inhabited by children ghosts that moved

toys around," she said. "Sometimes with ghosts I call in a friend who can free the ghosts—it's not an exorcism, she just allows them to leave." But in the case of the child ghosts, the homeowners opted to keep them and let them continue to play with toys.

Some stories are more sinister. Neeley did a history of a home in Carroll Park that was owned by a Jewish family in the early 1930s when the Ku Klux Klan was quite active in Long Beach.

The family was communist and had been holding a meeting of other communists at their home one night in 1932 when the Klan showed up with and set up a burning cross on the family's front lawn and forced their way into the house. They dragged the family, the husband, wife and two children and beat them with rubber hoses and their fists before the police came upon the scene and put an end to the violence, even though, said Neeley, some of

the Klansmen were on the force.

The daughter's name was Malvina Reynolds, who was 32 at the time of the attempted kidnapping. She went on to become a world-famous folk and protest singer. She wrote "Little Boxes," which became the theme song for the Showtime series "Weeds," as well as the folk/protest song "What Have they Done to the Rain." Both songs have been covered by multiple artists over the years, including Pete Seeger, Marianne Faithful, Joan Baez as well as more modern artists, such as Death Cab for Cutie, Elvis Costello, Randy Newman and Rilo Kiley who took turns performing "Little Boxes" for the opening credits on episodes of "Weeds."

Neeley runs across oddities in the course of her research—and it would be odd, indeed if she didn't. The house that she's currently researching in Bluff Park had a closet with a water faucet in it. She found that the home had once been carved up and turned into a boarding house with individual rooms being rented out and the faucet was just a remnant of the era. And there's no good reason to remove it.

Another home had a safe plastered into the wall and its dial was the only thing that protruded from the wall. Naturally, the homeowners couldn't help but tear the wall out to get to the safe and whatever riches were inside. As Geraldo Rivera could have predicted, the safe was empty. Neeley discovered that a former owner of the home owned a safe company.

Neeley's quest is never-ending and she's currently looking for relatives or archival materials of developer Adam Wasem and architect George Riddle.

Wasem moved to Long Beach from Iowa in 1904 and bought up a lot of acreage along what's now Broadway in the Bluff Park neighborhood. He lived in a house he built shortly after his arrival at 2445 Broadway. It has been said that the ghost of Wasem still haunts the house.

Riddle, said Neeley, specialized in Spanish and Mediterranean revival architecture and built courtyard housing like El Cordova in Alamitos Beach. "They were tiny houses, you might have 300-400 square feet and they feel palatial," said Neeley. "They were full of niches and hallways, they all had a front and back door. When I look at new condos they might have the same square footage but they're just boxes. I'd love to see his archives if there are any."

Neeley's research on a home includes information on the events going on in the city when the house was built, its former residents, old photographs and other historical information. She publishes it all in a hardcover book. She gets \$1,500 for the book.

HouStories' other services include researching data to qualify a property as a Historic Landmark or its eligibility for Mills Act, which can save you money on property tax; conducting workshops; doing speaking engagements; offering custom tours of neighborhoods; and providing consulting on an hourly basis.

For info on the service, visit <https://www.houstories.net/>. ■

Businesses will no longer be forced to have workers mask up, state agency rules

■ By **ALENA MASCHKE**
Reporter

The state's occupational safety board this month approved new workplace rules that will eliminate the mask-wearing mandate and social distancing requirements for vaccinated workers, allowing employees to follow the same health guidance as the general public.

Gov. Gavin Newsom signed an executive order the same day, on June 17, making the new rules effective immediately. Relaxed rules for the general public went into effect June 15.

Employers must document that workers who don't wear masks indoors are fully vaccinated. But employers have the choice of requiring workers to show proof of vaccination or allowing employees to "self-attest" their vaccination status, with the employer keeping a record of who self-attests.

Unvaccinated workers still must wear

masks, which employers must make available upon request.

The decision this month by the California Occupational Safety and Health Standards Board, or Cal/OSHA, came after weeks of back and forth and intense lobbying by industry groups. The four-hour hearing included nearly 1,000 participants.

The rules apply in almost every workplace setting, including restaurants, factories and retail.

Employers could also decide to require everyone to remain masked—vaccinated or not. And vaccinated employees will still be able to wear masks if they choose without facing retaliation.

Chris Hamrock, co-owner of the East Long Beach hair salon Salon Wire, said he will keep up stricter COVID-19 safety requirements for at least another month.

"We want to follow the science, which we recognize, but we also think there's a psychological aspect to it," Hamrock said.

"We just thought it was psychologically easier for people to adjust, rather than just rip the Band-Aid off."

Customers at Salon Wire will be asked to wear masks for at least another two weeks and stylists will likely continue to wear them for another month, Hamrock said.

Michael Dene, owner of Michael's on Naples and Michael's Pizzeria, said he is planning to collect employee feedback to help develop a policy for his restaurants.

"We're trying very hard to ensure safety and at the same time give them the freedom to now get back to normal order," he said. All of his employees are fully vaccinated, Dene said, and he is hoping to settle on new rules, in accordance with state and local guidelines, this week.

Long Beach has not issued any local rules for workplaces yet and employers should refer to Cal/OSHA mandates, said spokesperson Jennifer Rice Epstein. ■

Library late fees are barring thousands of Long Beach residents from checking out books

■ By **SEBASTIAN ECHEVERRY**
Reporter

Nearly 50,000 people in Long Beach are currently barred from borrowing library books, audiobooks, DVDs and magazines because they owe overdue fines of \$20 or more, according to a June 10 city memo from Library Services Director Glenda Williams. The majority of the banned accounts belong to adults, but overdue fines also preclude 6,000 children from checking materials out of city libraries.

The barred accounts are “concentrated in the most economically disadvantaged parts of the city, Central and North Long Beach,” according to Williams’s memo.

The number of barred accounts is nearly as high as the number of active card holders. There were 61,000 active library card holders in the city in 2018, according to an audit of the library system conducted in February.

Nubia Flores, a member of a community activist group called Long Beach Forward, was shocked to learn that so many people faced potential barriers to access the library because they owed money.

“That’s a significant number. To try to

remedy this should be an absolute top priority,” Flores said. “Libraries are essential to families.”

Even before the pandemic, public libraries played a crucial support role in Long Beach communities.

Flores works directly with parents of LBUSD students, and she recalled speaking with parents who said they wouldn’t step foot inside the library with their children because they had overdue fees to pay. If they went inside, and their children wanted to check a book out, they would have to explain to them that they couldn’t.

Storytime events for children in Spanish or Khmer language workshops that were hosted at the Mark Twain Library in Central Long Beach allowed communities to have access to educational programs. When the pandemic shut down in-person visits to the libraries, Flores knew the kind of impact it was going to have on low-income families.

“I did see a lot of families struggle having the libraries shut down,” Flores said. She remembered walking into the library a few days before they shut down in March, and worried that some parents wouldn’t be able to return to the library and return

books.

The February audit concluded that some of the services at the libraries did not meet the needs of the city’s racially, socioeconomically and linguistically diverse communities. This included late fees charged for overdue materials that were checked out.

The Library Services Department is working to address some of the issues presented in the audit, including the potential elimination of late fee charges.

Williams, the Library Services director, said she’s onboard with eliminating late fees completely as they would remove barriers for members of the community to continue to use the library without facing penalties.

“If your income is impacted, and you’re looking at paying a fine or paying for putting food on the table or a light bill, guess what, paying for that library fine is going to come at the end of the list,” Williams said.

Long Beach libraries are currently waiving late fees as part of the city’s response to the pandemic. About \$300,000 was allocated from federal relief funds included in the Long Beach Recovery Act to waive library fines for one year. Williams said there is enough money to continue waiving fees through 2021.

The City Council will still have to decide if any outstanding late fees will be waived and if late fees will be eliminated

entirely moving forward.

Other cities have seen considerable success in eliminating late fees, Williams said. Chicago’s public libraries eliminated late fees in 2019 and saw a 240% increase in the number of books returned, according to data provided in the June 10 memo. Salt Lake City Public Library reported a 16% increase in the number of items borrowed and an increase of 26,000 library cardholders a year after it also eliminated late fees.

Details as to how the elimination of late fees in Long Beach would look like are still being worked out and depend on what the city council decides, Williams said. If approved, no new late fees would be charged, existing fees would be canceled but library users would still be charged for lost or damaged items.

The American Library Association, the world’s oldest library organization, enacted a resolution in 2019 concluding that fines for overdue library materials is discriminatory. The group urged public libraries nationwide to waive outstanding fines.

With other cities already eliminating or reworking late fee charges since 2019, Flores added she was concerned that Long Beach had not yet adopted something similar.

“It is an issue that they are getting to this so late, considering other cities have done this,” she said. “This shouldn’t even be a debate.” ■

Long Beach Center for Economic Inclusion announces first president and CEO

■ By **BRANDON RICHARDSON**
Reporter

More than one year after its launch, the Long Beach Center for Economic Inclusion announced Byron Reed as its first president and CEO.

“I am extremely excited and grateful for the opportunity to lead the organization around this critical work,” Reed said in the announcement.

A former CIT/One West Bank senior vice president and head of community and local government relations, Reed has a long history of community involvement with specific expertise in economic inclusion. During his tenure at the bank, Reed oversaw a multi-million dollar philanthropic grant budget, partnering with elected officials, civic and community leaders, religious organizations and nonprofits by hosting community forums to educate people about financial services.

Reed will assume the role in July.

“[Reed has] had a very successful career doing community development work in the private sector, and I think it makes him uniquely qualified to bridge the gap here in Long Beach to build economic opportunities for all,” center Board President Bob Cabeza said in a statement.

The Long Beach City Council unanimously approved the “Everyone In” Implementation Plan in June 2019, which included a recommendation to support the establishment of a community development corporation to facilitate economic development at the neighborhood level. To that end, Wells Fargo provided a seed grant that was matched by the city and in March 2020, the Center for Economic Inclusion launched.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the center into overdrive from the start and in its first year it directed more than \$750,000 in resources for small business support, food security, digital inclusion and housing security. The organization created a business navigator program that has supported more than 150 small businesses over the last 12 months, created the Long Beach Food Support Network, which has put food on the table in 1,500 households per week for the last 13 months and provided free or low-cost internet service to more than 200 students, among other initiatives and programs.

Overall, the center has partnered with more than 25 community organizations to direct resources and support to businesses, organizations and individuals in the underserved communities of North, Central and West Long Beach.

“Now more than ever,” Reed said, “economic inclusion is critical in order to create an equitable environment for positive growth and impact throughout the city of Long Beach.” ■



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From Venmo to crypto, nonprofit wants to move street vendors away from cash for their safety

■ By **SEBASTIAN ECHEVERRY**
Reporter

A tech start-up and a local nonprofit are partnering to explore the possibilities of using new cryptocurrencies to help street vendors move away from cash—something that can make them an easy target for theft.

Some tech-savvy street vendors have already made the transition to using Venmo or Cash App, which are considered popular methods to send money or pay bills digitally.

But this duo's idea looks beyond what's in use now.

"We would love to catch them up to speed on what is happening in the crypto world," HJ Chong, co-founder of philanthropic nonprofit Local Hearts, said. "If we can educate them to be up to date with technology, then they will be up to date with the times."

Local Hearts and start-up ZUZcoin have their eyes set on the fringe of a new age of digital currencies, specifically cryptocurrencies, which has recently exploded onto mainstream media following a trading craze for Dogecoin, a crypto coin that gathered popularity thanks to a celebrity endorsement from Tesla's Elon Musk, and volatile stock trading.

Given its decentralized nature with no traditional banking fees and an untapped potential, cryptocurrencies could be used to help street vendors accept different forms of payment so they can sell their elotes and chopped fruit by the Bitcoin—so their theory goes.

An example of what this could look like in practice would be scannable QR code stickers placed on the sides of a food cart. A customer with a digital wallet application installed on their smartphone with a few crypto coins to spend could simply scan the QR code with the phone and transfer funds directly into the digital wallet of the street vendor.

The vendor could then trade in the crypto coins for U.S. dollars through a company that offers that sort of service.

Chong, Local Hearts' co-founder, admits that the idea seems far fetched, and even more confusing for most street vendors—and customers—to use today, but he believes cryptocurrencies could be an alternative to help keep street vendors safe when working on the streets.

Local Hearts is partnering with ZUZcoin, a crypto coin arm of a newly formed digital software company called Zero Utility, to help them traverse the complexities of cryptocurrencies.

The two organizations met in Long Beach during a backpack giveaway



Street vendor Pedro Castellanos-Aguilar holds a laminated sheet with direct QR code links to his Venmo and Cash App accounts for customers to buy items from him without using cash. Photo by Sebastian Echeverry.

through the Manny Pacquiao Foundation in April. ZUZcoin officially launched in March this year and raised over \$30,000 in crypto currencies during the giveaway event for both nonprofit groups. The company has also helped Local Hearts establish a digital wallet so the organization can also accept crypto coin donations.

Jared Brunson, CEO of ZUZcoin, and the 13 employees within the company, have developed a niche in a growing digital marketplace of non fungible tokens, commonly referred to as NFTs.

Brunson said that digital artists or musicians collaborate with ZUZcoin to help them auction and sell ownership of their works of art or music.

Similar to cryptocurrencies, the NFT market is still fairly new, though some NFTs are already selling for large sums of money on the internet. A viral 2007 video titled "Charlie Bit Me" on YouTube recently sold as an NFT for about \$761,000, as reported in Yahoo Finance.

Brunson said ZUZcoin's main role in the partnership with Local Hearts is to serve as a guide into the digital currency market for street vendors.

"There's a barrier. Not too many people know how to use crypto, and that's another educational factor that we want to tackle," Brunson said. "We have access to the inside of the space, so we're able to bridge the gaps, and that's our biggest ability at the moment—having connections on the

outside world and within the crypto space, which is pretty shelled off."

Aside from industry know-how, some street vendors also face language and cultural barriers.

Events hosted by Local Hearts often help migrant Latino street vendors and children in low-income communities of color. Late last month, Chong and fellow Local Hearts co-founder Tito Hernandez hosted a buy-out event for two street vendors who had been harassed and wrongfully ticketed.

Chong says most street vendors are quite savvy, but they still struggle to catch up with modern methods of payment.

"We know a man who's in his 40s and he just knows Facebook, WhatsApp and that's it," Chong said.

On Tuesday, the Long Beach City Council announced that they are looking into more safety programs to protect street vendors, including helping them move away from cash transactions as well. Cash is also still a favored form of payment because they can easily send money to their families back home, Chong said.

There have been some encounters in which street vendors were seriously injured and robbed. During an unveiling event for a new rainbow-colored lifeguard tower that burned down this year, Getzer Tellez, an older vendor who was selling items at the event, said he gets nervous when selling on the street while carrying cash in his pockets.

"Sometimes you meet people with bad intentions, and you get nervous," Tellez said in Spanish.

According to data from the Los Angeles Police Department, crimes against street vendors rose nearly 337% between 2010 and 2019.

Pedro Castellanos-Aguilar, a deaf street vendor in Long Beach, was also selling at last week's event.

He already has QR codes on a laminated sheet of paper with direct links to his Venmo and Cash App accounts. He said he's been using the digital services since 2017 and has accepted debit card payments since 2012.

While the two men worked, Tellez had to turn down some customers because he only took cash. Tellez said he's more interested in learning how to adapt to debit card payments, and noted that cryptocurrencies seem too complicated for him to learn.

Jeruel Garado, a marketing partner with ZUZcoin, echoed Tellez' sentiments, adding that the crypto market is not practical yet for street vendors, but hopes that it will become more accessible in the future.

"This is not particularly friendly yet for street vendors, as of right now, and that is mainly due to the high cost of transferring the coins from wallet to wallet," Garado said. "It will come to a point where these fees are going to be very low. It's a matter of adapting and understanding it today so they can be more empowered for tomorrow." ■

Council approves zone change that could bring more cannabis dispensaries Downtown

■ By **ALENA MASCHKE**
Reporter

The Long Beach City Council on June 15 approved a zoning change that could pave the way for more cannabis businesses to locate in Downtown Long Beach.

The zoning code amendment was prompted by an application to open a recreational cannabis shop in a mixed-use building on Pine Avenue, which was approved unanimously by the Planning Commission in April.

“We’re going to bring union jobs, we’re going to bring revenue to the city,” Elliot Lewis, the applicant and CEO of Catalyst Cannabis Co, which already runs several dispensaries in Long Beach and beyond, told the City Council.

Lewis is planning to open a 4,639-square-foot dispensary at 433 Pine Ave. To do so, he needed special approval from the Planning Commission as well as a zoning change. The dispensary would operate on the ground floor of a residential building, a co-location that isn’t currently allowed in the city’s Downtown zoning code.

The zoning change will still have to be read a second time before it can go into effect. If given final approval, it would allow other shops selling rec-

reational cannabis to operate in Downtown retail zones, and for them to be located in buildings housing both residences and businesses.

Currently, there are no licenses available for new dispensaries to open up anywhere in the city, but an ongoing feasibility study expected to conclude in September is looking into the possibility of offering additional licenses to disadvantaged entrepreneurs seeking to enter the legal cannabis industry. Lewis’s license for the new dispensary was part of a batch of 32 adult-use licenses approved by voters in 2016.

Several local businesses as well as the Downtown business improvement district have expressed their support for the dispensary to move into the space neighboring the recently closed Kress Market.

“Hell or high water, we’re going to uplift that entire block,” Lewis said of his vision for the North Pine area.

The Long Beach Collective Association, a local group representing business owners in the industry, however, has opposed the zoning code change, arguing in a letter to the City Council that it would “allow a single operator to take advantage of the City’s zoning rules” and “limit other operators’ ability to conduct business in downtown.”

Lewis is a former member of the

association who was ousted in September, with the association citing failure to pay dues and “lobbying for city wide policy change for personal gain” as the reason for terminating his membership.

The City Council approved the zoning code change in a 9-0 vote. It is scheduled for a final read during the next council meeting on July 6. ■

Poke restaurant and vintage store to open at LBX

■ By **BRANDON RICHARDSON**
Reporter

Long Beach Exchange has welcomed two new tenants: retailer Open Air Vintage and fast-casual Poké2 Grill.

Founded by Martaveous Holliday and Savannah Singman, Open Air Vintage curates top-quality clothing, exclusive sneakers, plants and accessories. The “aesthetically driven” vintage shop celebrated its grand opening on Saturday, June 19. The event included complimentary shaved ice and a Kaws keychain as well as a raffle for a chance to win a mystery Jordan 1 and other prizes.

“We ... are truly passionate about what we do, and we can’t wait to share that passion with the patrons at Long Beach Exchange,” Holliday said in a statement. “LBX is an integral part of the Long Beach community, we are so

thankful to be opening our very first location here.”

No date has been announced for Poké2’s opening, but according to the announcement the eatery will be serving up its specialty and customizable build-your-own bowls later this summer inside The Hangar from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.

This will be the second Poké2 location. Its flagship restaurant opened in Downey in April 2017 and won the Best of Downey award in the restaurant category three years in a row, according to the announcement.

“We are very excited to be opening our second inside The Hangar at Long Beach Exchange and can’t wait to get to know the Long Beach community,” owner and CEO Sarah Kim said in a statement.

Long Beach Exchange is at 4069 N. Lakewood Blvd. ■



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Planning Commission postpones vote on Fire Station 9 demolition, seeking clarity on future of the property

■ By **JASON RUIZ**
Reporter

The Long Beach Planning Commission indefinitely postponed a vote that would have allowed Fire Station 9 in Los Cerritos to be demolished, with commissioners wanting to wait for a more detailed plan that could include reusing the building instead of tearing it down.

Fire Station 9 has been closed since June 2019 after recurring mold that was originally discovered in December 2017 could not be fully removed, according to the city. Station 9's crew had been split among two other fire stations across the city but now operates at a temporary site at an old Boeing facility near Cherry Avenue and Wardlow Road.

The station sat between the Los Cerritos and Bixby Knolls neighborhoods. The city

started negotiations earlier this year to buy land less than a mile north of Station 9 to potentially build a new station closer to its old home.

The city recently sought the approval of environmental documents that could have allowed for the demolition of the building to eliminate any nuisance activity or health hazards while it tried to sell the land, but without certainty of the city's intentions, the commission opted to delay the vote.

"I was just curious about approving something and then hoping that what we don't want to have happen, happen down the road," Commissioner Richard Lewis said of demolishing the building. "It just doesn't seem like the right way to move forward to me."

Approving the documents would not have necessarily led to the demolition, but would have allowed for it and other options for the building in the future, explained Chris Koontz, Long Beach's deputy director of Development Services. Koontz said that by approving the worst case scenario it would allow for a staff-level decision down the road if a purchaser wanted to keep the building and carry out the estimated \$1.5 million in mold remediation in order to safely reuse the building.


"We would not be starting from scratch because that analysis [the EIR] would already be done," Koontz said. "And in this case, we'd be refining the project to be less impactful than more impactful."

While the station is considered a historic resource due to its construction in 1938 under the federal Works Progress Administration, it has not been designated as historic. The city argued that the extensive work required to remove the mold would negatively alter the potential historic status of the building, and not removing it would make it uninhabitable.

The commission wrestled with alternatives like approving the environmental review documents but not the site plan review, something that a city official said would make it difficult to market the property to a potential buyer, as well as approving the documents with a suggestion to the City Council that the building not be destroyed for a predetermined amount of time.

However, Assistant City Attorney Mike Mais said that the council could ultimately ignore that suggestion.

The commission voted 5-0 to postpone a vote on the future of the building until more options can be presented, including a potential buyer of the property and their plans for the site. ■



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After nearly a year as aquarium chief, Peter Kareiva's job is going swimmingly

■ By **TIM GROBATY**
Columnist

Peter Kareiva took over as CEO and president of the Aquarium of the Pacific last August, replacing Jerry Schubel, who had run the facility for the previous 18 years. He inherited an empty tourist and scientific aquarium—empty, that is, except for the facility's 12,000 mostly marine animals from throughout the Pacific Rim, which expected the same care and conditions that they received prior to the COVID-caused closure.

Now, the Aquarium of the Pacific is once again open to the public. And, of course, we wanted to know if the animals are OK.

"They're fine," Kareiva reassured us.

OK, enough about otters and sharks. How has Kareiva weathered his first nearly 11 months at the facility?

"I think it's totally bizarre to begin anything in the midst of COVID," he said. "The essence of leadership is communicating and establishing relationships with people and it's really hard to develop new relationships through Zoom. You can maintain relationships, but it's difficult to establish new ones."

With things beginning to thaw in recent weeks, Kareiva says he's met many of his employees, some for the first time face-to-face. "It's a real difference," he says.

Aside from difficulty with communication, finding living arrangements has been a bit of a challenge for Kareiva, who says he lives a very minimalist lifestyle.

"I know this sound perverse, I really believe in low-impact living, I don't own a car, but I also love the urban experience. I love to go out. But it's been difficult finding a place to rent that's



People arrive at the Aquarium of the Pacific, Wednesday, June 23, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

walking distance to the aquarium." That's a problem he's solved temporarily by staying at the Hyatt Centric hotel, which is so close to Kareiva's office that it hardly makes a dent in getting his steps in.

And the Centric, he says, has a nice pool, which is important for an aquatic creature: "It's important because I can't run. My knees are shot. But I can swim."

The best part of his job as aquarium boss, he says, is going to the aquarium.

"It's a morale boost," he says.

"There are two things I like to do there: One is seeing people being

happy. It reminds me of why I do the job. The families and the children. It always cheers me up. Then, I truly do enjoy all the exhibits. Sometimes I go late at night and just relax. Some days it's seeing the octopus, sometimes it's just watching the giant sea bass in its big blue tank. It's so tranquil to watch. The variety is terrific."

Kareiva's resume is singularly impressive and includes, among a host of other achievements, a stretch as the director of the Institute of the Environment and Sustainability at UCLA and as chief scientist and vice president of The Nature Conservancy, where he was responsible for maintaining the quality of over 600 staff engaged in conservation science in 36 countries.

"But what's striking about this job is the sense of community, not just with the staff, but with the residents of the city," he says. "Oftentimes, institutions aren't rooted in the community, but the aquarium is very much rooted in Long Beach."

Kareiva says that often when a new CEO comes into an organization, the leadership team and the staff want to know what kind of stamp or focus the new person will bring. But, he says, at the aquarium, it's just doing more of what everyone wants. They're all on the same page: "Community, conservation, preservation. At the aquarium, that feeling is just so strong and that struck me immediately."

So the future, under Kareiva, will be much like the past, under Schubel.

Cultural festivals every month, an array of special programs and exhibits, seminars led by scientists and other experts, and movies in the beautiful and still-new Pacific Visions Theater, which had opened just prior to the COVID shut-down.

"And we're going to be doing a First Wednesdays series, where at 7 p.m. on the first Wednesday of the month, we'll try to get significant thought leaders to come and speak on a variety of subjects."

First up will be the triumphant return of former CEO Jerry Schubel, who will speak about his new book, "The Future Chesapeake: Shaping the Future," at 7 p.m. July 7. The event is free, but you should bring some cash to buy a copy of the book, which Schubel will sign after his talk. You'll also need to make reservations, which you can do at the aquarium's website: www.aquariumofpacific.org.

The aquarium, which is fully open now, is still easing its way toward full capacity. Currently, visitors still need to make a reservation (and purchase tickets).

"We're not crowded, we want people to be comfortable," says Kareiva. "We're at about 50% capacity now, but we're paying close attention to how it feels as more people come in; we're adjusting up. All aquaria don't want things to get too crowded. You maintain your exhibits for maximum comfort for the visitors as well as the animals." ■



Peter Kareiva, president and CEO of the Aquarium of the Pacific. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

Ollie the sea otter is cute and he knows it: Behind the Aquarium of the Pacific's viral TikTok account



Madeline Walden, assistant social media manager at the Aquarium of the Pacific, laughs as Harpo the sea lion sticks out his tongue, Wednesday, June 23, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

■ By **TESS KAZENOFF**
Reporter

Ollie the sea otter, Harpo the sea lion and the Aquarium of the Pacific's 12,000 other adorable critters have won the hearts of the public through a phone screen.

In the world of the Aquarium's now-viral TikTok account, penguins march with rainbow flags in a Pride Parade (1.4 million views), Harpo, the aquarium's social media star, belts out in song to pop punk rock (405,900 views), and—the post that fueled the account's rise in popularity at the start of the pandemic—an octopus eats a toy boat loaded with mussels.

Madeline Walden, the aquarium's 29-year-old social media curator—and the woman behind it all—isn't striving for perfection, but rather authenticity.

"We want to make learning fun," she said. "We want to make it enticing to everybody, no matter what your education level is or where you are in the world."

The local aquarium's TikTok following has grown to an astounding 2.3

million, more than any other aquarium or zoo in the country, Walden said.

She started the account in January 2020, just before the pandemic. The marketing team was supportive of the decision, she said, recognizing the potential of the sometimes controversial app.

The account had a mere 160 followers through March 2020, and then came the silly octopus video, set to intense "Jaws"-like music, which boosted the aquarium's account immediately to 100,000 followers.

One of the account's most viewed videos, currently at 14 million, features Ollie the sea otter munching on a heart-shaped, frozen clam "cookie" for Valentine's Day.

"Ollie, you are otterly adorable," reads the robotic speech of TikTok's automated text-to-voice feature.

"I know," replies Ollie's voice-over (and he's not wrong).

TikTok is a video-sharing app owned by Chinese company ByteDance that allows users to share 15- to 60-second videos that often capitalize on trending music or jokes.

Devising mini narratives about sea otters, sea lions, penguins and other living creatures to both educate and entertain seemed like a perfect fit, even when the aquarium sometimes has had to deal with the sad side of their business, such as when Maggie the sea otter died.

"We have these wonderful days of triumphs and celebrations, like the fun birthday parties and the feline singing contest," said Walden. "We also have really down days when we unfortunately lose animals, because that's part of life."

While some videos are speedily produced to hop on a TikTok trend, which can change by the day, other videos take a couple of weeks to formulate.

Walden's animal expertise has mostly come from learning on the job. She collaborates and brainstorms with the animal care department, constantly aiming to make each idea funnier, or reach even farther, while utilizing the team's vast marine life knowledge.

On the aquarium's TikTok, you can find videos ranging from a "Why do sea lions have black teeth?" explainer,

which has accumulated 25.8 million views, to Harpo explaining his skincare routine (a sustainable seafood diet, and gentle saltwater exfoliation), racking up 531,000 views.

Walden said it is an honor to tell these stories, particularly about animals who have spent the majority of their lives at the aquarium.

She understands her audience (she's spent hours utilizing the app herself), and she knows they want authenticity and the confirmation that life isn't always picture-perfect.

Her strategy is working.

The aquarium has amassed 40.8 million "likes" total, but Walden's intent isn't just focused on numbers.

She's proud of the account's success, to be sure, but she's even more proud of the connections that the app has been able to forge, connecting people across the world since the account's formation.

"We're seeing comments saying, 'I live in the U.K. and I've never heard of your aquarium, you're on my bucket list now,' and 'I grew up in Long Beach, and now I live on the other side of the world, and how wonderful that I am



A selection of viral TikTok videos from the Aquarium of the Pacific.

able to follow my hometown aquarium on social media.”

Walden is a Long Beach local herself and spent her childhood enjoying field trips and family excursions to the aquarium. She has now been employed at the aquarium for five years.

“The metrics and the numbers, they’re obviously great and awesome, but to me, it’s those connections that mean so much more, because those are people who are ultimately going to stay connected with us, and hopefully come back to visit one day,” she said.

Walden, who met her husband on MySpace and her bridesmaids on Tumblr, is no stranger to the power that so-

cial media has to connect, and hones this ability to create engaging content that makes science accessible.

According to Walden, starring animals and allowing their charisma to shine through has bridged this gap between the aquarium and the public, during a year when access to the aquarium was severely limited.

“Obviously this past year has brought a lot of hardship to the aquarium, but I really had this light in the dark with being able to create on TikTok and to connect to that community,” she said.

Join Walden live on the aquarium’s TikTok at 6 p.m. every Tuesday. ■



Harpo the sea lion barks for Madeline Walden, assistant social media manager at the Aquarium of the Pacific, Wednesday, June 23, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

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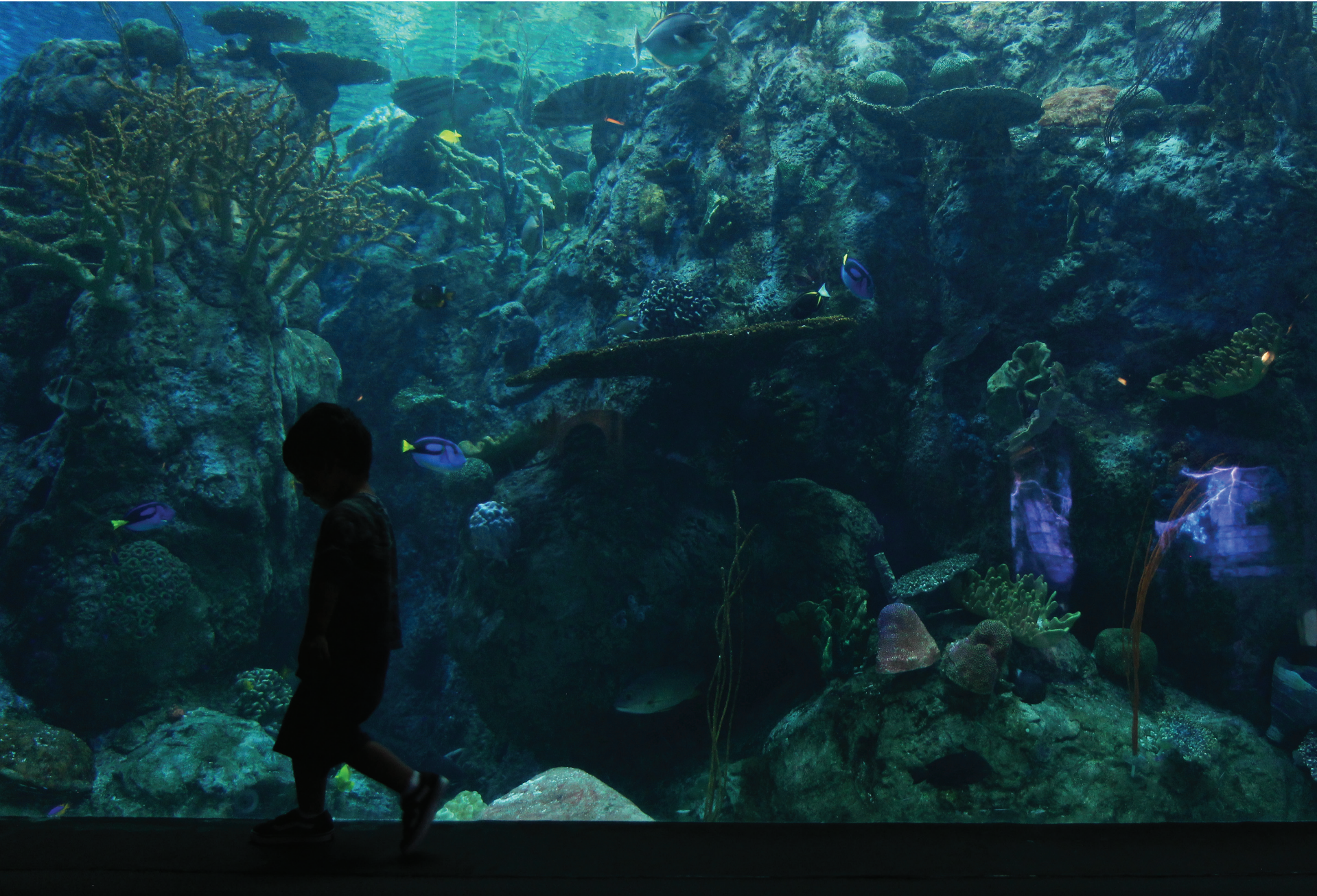
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New aquarium exhibit strives to unlock the mystery of coral reefs



A boy walks by an exhibit at the Aquarium of the Pacific, Thursday, June 17, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

■ By **TESS KAZENOFF**
Reporter

After a long year of full closures and limited capacities, the Aquarium of the Pacific finally welcomed the public to its newest and most colorful exhibit, “Coral Reefs: Nature’s Underground Cities.”

The exhibit is immersive and exciting, reflecting the vibrancy of coral reefs and their environment, said Nate Jaros, curator of fish and invertebrates at the aquarium.

“There’s a lot of motion, there’s a lot of action,” said Jaros.

The exhibit guides visitors through a gallery of ocean-themed art, and a “wildly popular” “Paint-the-fish” exhibit for kids, in which they draw pictures of ocean animals onto small tablets that then project onto a large screen, interacting with each other.

Visitors can be transported under the sea with a film, focused on demonstrating the interconnectedness of the species and the different roles that animals play on the reef.

“We really want to tell stories that people can take great messages home about. It’s important just to respect and admire coral reefs for their intrinsic nat-

ural beauty, and supporting eco-tourism is really important in that regard,” said Jaros.

Other notable exhibit elements include an interactive segment detailing the coral life cycle, and a section dedicated to coral restoration.

“As one of my favorite marine biolo-

gists said, (coral are) kind of part-animal, part-vegetable, part-mineral,” said Jaros. “It’s kind of a foreign world for more of us.”

The exhibit strives to bridge that gap in understanding to children and adults alike, while telling stories that will get people interested and involved, said Ja-

ros.

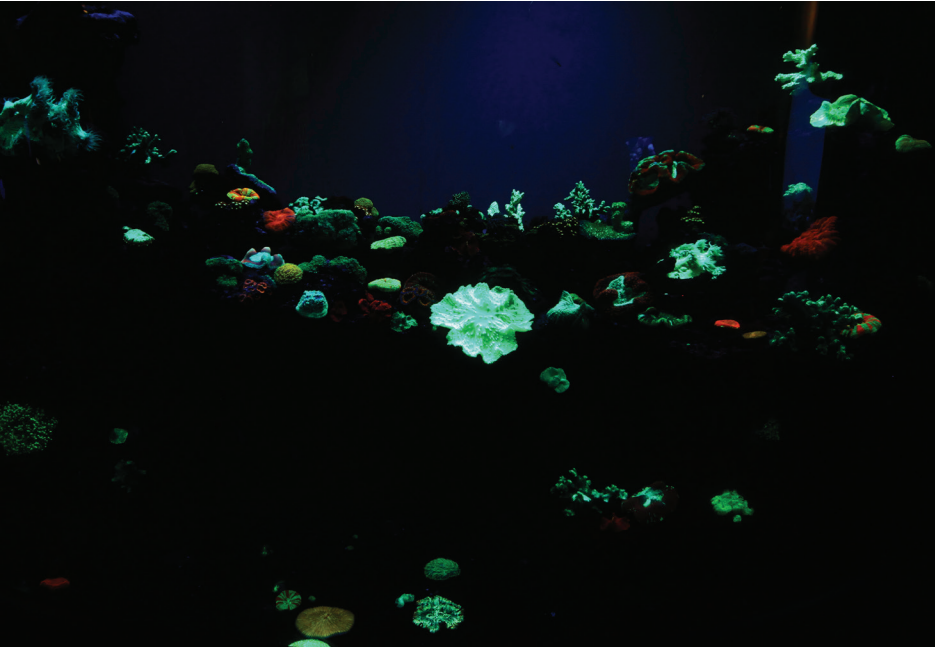
Along with the wide array of coral that is of course central to the exhibit, visitors can also observe bioluminescent fish and parrotfish, colorful fish that eat coral. There is also a tropical day octopus, which is active in—you guessed it—the day, unlike most octopuses.

The development of the lively exhibit began prior to the pandemic, with plans to open to the public in 2020. But when the pandemic allowed the aquarium to open its indoor facilities for only 20 days last year, the time actually allowed the reef to develop even further, creating an even more vibrant end result by the time of the aquarium’s full reopening on June 12.

“I wish we had that extra year to develop all of our exhibits, it would just add that much more excitement to them,” said Jaros.

In exhibit development, the intention is to create a display that is relatable and understandable, while hopefully also exciting and sustainable, and according to Jaros, the Coral Reefs exhibit has hit the mark.

“We’re happy to open and share that with the guests this year.” ■



A glowing coral reef exhibit at the Aquarium of the Pacific, Thursday, June 17, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

After a quiet year, Aquarium ready to welcome the public back to events

■ By **TESS KAZENOFF**
Reporter

Aside from losing patrons for several months during the pandemic, the Aquarium of the Pacific has been unable to host in-person events since February 2020.

The aquarium is gearing up to restart its social calendar, which began with a June 27 film screening of "Plastic Bag Store: The Film," focused on plastic use.

However, this only scratches the surface of the types of events the aquarium hosts that will return to in-person this year.

The aquarium has a variety of events on tap, such as a lecture and book signing on July 7 at 7 p.m. and a monthly, adults-only night dive, an aquarium favorite that involves live music, food and drinks, returning on July 23 from 7:30-11:30 p.m.

But its most notable events are perhaps its array of cultural events that, like the rest of the world, had to transition to virtual last year.

Typically, the aquarium hosts 12 to 14 major cultural festivals a year, in addition to many smaller events including its recent Juneteenth story-telling event.

The cultural events aim to create a rich experience, educating and engaging the public, involving 130 community groups and many more individual participants, according to Peter Martineau, the aquarium's marketing events manager.

Some events span across the world, such as the International Children's Festival, recognizing Persian, Slovak, Czech cultures, and more, planned for this fall.

Others focus on regions, such as the

American Indian Festival or Southeast Asia Day.

Through many of the cultures and festivities celebrated at the aquarium, guests are able to gain understanding of traditional histories and connections to nature, particularly the ocean.

Martineau explained that many of the cultures celebrated at the aquarium share their histories of sustainable living and conservation, from "long before the word 'conservation' was even around."

"The whole idea is to get everybody to realize that the ocean belongs to all of us, the ocean is ours to share and to enjoy, and it's also our mutual responsibility to take care

of," he said.

Upcoming festivals celebrating diversity at the aquarium aren't limited to just culture, with the Festival of Human Abilities planned for this fall (the date is yet to be announced), which celebrates different capabilities.

"This is a festival that just will melt your heart, and also inspires you because it's all about people overcoming challenges and limitations," said Martineau.

Last year, the pandemic caused the cancellation of all of the aquarium's spring events, and it was a months-long process to figure out how to best develop the typical festivities for an online format.

Many logistics were involved, through

adapting the events to abide by social distancing protocols, while effectively portraying the performances and activities for a virtual audience.

Despite the challenges, the virtual events were an enormous success, said Martineau. Through the transition to virtual, the events were able to engage people from across the world, who would not have normally been able to attend, he said.

The events were so successful that most upcoming in-person events will continue to include a live-streamed component.

However, Martineau and the aquarium staff could not be more excited to welcome back the public for its in-person celebrations.

"What I do is, it's all connecting with people, and it's right there in the mission and vision of the aquarium is connections with people," said Martineau. "I think we're all, in many ways, just really looking forward to having that community connection."

Some of the aquarium's upcoming festivals include:

Sept. 18-19: American Indian Festival

Oct. 2-3: Baja Splash Festival—celebrating Hispanic Heritage

Oct. 4: Seniors Day

Oct. 17: Southeast Asia Day, celebrating people from Cambodian, Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos, and Indonesia

Oct. 30-31: Scarium, a Halloween-themed event.

Nov. 13-14: Autumn Festival, celebrating China, Japan, Korea, and Philippines

View more details on the aquarium's event webpage: www.aquariumofpacific.org/events/ ■



A group of women dance during the Aquarium of the Pacific's Southeast Asian Day. Photo courtesy of the aquarium.

Volunteers, the lifeblood of the aquarium, slowly return after long shutdown

■ By **TESS KAZENOFF**
Reporter

Over the past year, volunteers at the Aquarium of the Pacific shifted from diving into fish tanks and working in touch labs to sewing masks for essential workers, creating coloring books for elementary school children stuck at home and trash cleanups.

During a normal summer, over 1,200 volunteers contribute to the success of the Aquarium of the Pacific.

But during the pandemic, the number shrunk down to only 350 at its lowest point.

The remaining volunteers quickly shifted to assess the community's needs during that time, until they could safely return to the aquarium.

"It's just kind of part of our fabric that, of course, it was immediate to just turn around and say well, 'We have some fabric, how can we make this better?'" said Cassandra Davis, volunteer program manager at the aquarium.

That number has slowly regrown to close to its original numbers, with 800 to 900 volunteers currently involved as restrictions have eased and the aquarium has fully reopened.

Barbara Anders has been volunteering at the aquarium since its opening in 1998, which coincided with her retirement date.

"I remember thinking, 'What the hell have I gotten into?' But it didn't take me long to settle in and think, 'Wow this is a lot of fun,'" she said.

For Anders, the pandemic was no reason to stop volunteering, especially considering the strict regulations the aquarium followed.

"I felt very comfortable going there, in fact, it was nice to get out of the house," said the former sixth-grade teacher.

Anders has worked in the education department throughout her time at the aquarium, but the roles that volunteers can fill are vast.

At the aquarium, there is a volunteer program for anyone with nearly any interest or skill set: volunteers contribute to the social media feed and website with photography, work behind the scenes in the animal husbandry department, or even gather plankton, for instance.

Davis has worked in many of these roles herself, beginning as a volunteer back in 2011, in which she tried her hand at exhibit interpreting, special events, and community science, just to name a few.

"Our volunteers have a very strong sense of connecting to others. It is very much part of our fabric that we need everybody in order to help our ocean, in order to help our oceans' habitats, and there's no one way to volunteer," Davis said.

An integral part of the aquarium's mission is its youth outreach; roughly 20% of the aquarium's volunteers are under the age of 18.

"I think that more and more teens are getting recognized for their involvement," said Davis. "I think that there's a lot of passion in

teens in general, and it's been really wonderful to see that getting a bigger spotlight."

While yard signs became the pandemic-appropriate way to celebrate birthdays and graduations, teens created a yard sign initiative, taking the opportunity to introduce their neighbors to a new animal or connection to the Pacific Ocean.

Teens also continued their Teen Science Cafe and Teen Science Council programs throughout the pandemic (although they switched the meetings to virtual), focusing on science communication, education and conservation, while providing information and resources to their peers.

Now that coronavirus restrictions have lifted, Davis is most excited for the return of floor volunteers, who interact with guests, emphasizing the importance of having volunteers of all ages to fill this role.

Volunteers as young as 9 can participate, as part of the family volunteer program.

For an aquarium that welcomes guests of all ages and backgrounds, it is important to include diverse volunteers as well, according to Davis.

"To see two 9-year-olds talking about sharks, and their different teeth and adaptations ... they can talk to each other in a way that peers can talk to one another, and that's different from somebody who's older, giving a lecture," she said.

People from all walks of life volunteer at the aquarium, said Davis, from lawyers and flight attendants, to students to scientists.

"They all get to learn together and make discoveries together. And I think it's wonderful."

Davis hopes that many of the pandemic-era initiatives such as a watershed-cleanup trash program remain even as things go back to "normal," but the aquarium will also see a return of more of its in-person opportunities.

In-person interaction is a key part of making the aquarium such a welcoming place, said Anders, who has seen the aquarium develop from scratch.

Anders, who has countless stories of memorable guest interactions from over the years, recalled a young man in a wheelchair who visited the aquarium for what would probably be his last birthday. He was very sick, and he wanted to see the ocean.

Anders gave him a private tour, then took him to the Shark Lagoon where the crew there helped him touch a shark.

"And they had everybody sing happy birthday, and this guy told me that is the best birthday he ever had," said Anders.

"That one really stood out because it really shows the impact of what volunteers can do, the impact they have," she said.

According to Davis, it is these connections that are built through volunteering that make the aquarium such a special place, along with the unique stories that each guest and volunteer like Anders brings to the aquarium.

"Anybody who wants to participate in ocean conservation or education has a home here," she said. ■

Thanks to rescue and rehabilitation efforts, aquarium welcomes new animals

■ By **TESS KAZENOFF**
Reporter

For the over 12,000 species that consider the Aquarium of the Pacific their home, it was business as usual over the past year.

Minor changes had to be made for the animals who were used to human activity, including a video screen that was installed for the aquarium’s day octopus to serve as a type of enrichment in the public’s absence. Other animals received new toys, said Nate Jaros, curator of fish and invertebrates at the aquarium.

The Aquarium of the Pacific even welcomed some new members to the family, including a green sea turtle (now in the new Coral Reef exhibit), a red-footed booby bird, and a “sexy shrimp,” named for its dance-like movements.

The introduction of the new animals is largely due to the aquarium’s rescue and rehabilitation programs. The booby, for instance, was determined to be non-releasable by the Monterey Bay Aquarium before being transferred to its new home at Aquarium of the Pacific.

Animals can be determined non-releasable for a variety of reasons, such as an injury that limits their ability to forage or live

in the wild, or if the animal was stranded at such a young age that it hasn’t developed the skill sets needed to thrive in the wild.

Most of the aquarium’s sea otters were orphaned as pups, according to Brett Long, the Aquarium of the Pacific’s bird and mammal curator. After being deemed non-releasable by the Monterey Bay Aquarium, they were brought to Long Beach for a long-term home.

In March 2020, the aquarium entered into a partnership with Monterey Bay Aquarium and SeaWorld San Diego, where adult female sea otters act as surrogate moms for pups, usually for nine to 11 months, hopefully teaching them the necessary skills to be re-released into the wild.

Monterey Bay Aquarium has been involved in the effort for 20 years, said Long.

“What they found was that if they let the female sea otters teach skills to (the pups), that they were more likely to succeed in the wild, and then reach a breeding age and actually produce more otters,” said Long.

However, Monterey Bay only had the capacity for about four sea otter pups per year, while on average 12 to 15 stranded pups are found along the Central California coastline each year.

Long hopes that the Aquarium of the



A guest puts his hand against the glass of a jellyfish exhibit inside the Aquarium of the Pacific, Thursday, June 17, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

Pacific will have the capacity to foster or surrogate up to 12 sea otter pups per year.

“The pandemic happened and it slowed down that process a little bit, but we’ve still been moving forward in creating and building the infrastructure that will allow us to participate,” said Long, who hopes that the project will be completed within the next four to six months.

Not only does the aquarium work to provide rescue services, but it also participates in numerous conservation efforts.

Conservation is an “obligation,” according to Long, who said that the Aquarium of the Pacific is at the forefront of that work.

White abalone, the first invertebrate to be listed on the Endangered Species Act, are bred at the aquarium, and giant sea bass, also critically endangered, are studied and monitored by the aquarium as well.

The rescue and conservation programs

extend to sea turtles, who wind up at the aquarium for a variety of reasons, sometimes needing medical care as a result of injuries from fishing gear, or other times they just need to warm up from the cold California water, said Jaros.

While the Aquarium of the Pacific emphasizes the importance of conservation and animal rehabilitation, Jaros said that efforts can also be made at home.

“A lot of people think that one person can’t really make a difference, but we can make a difference,” said Jaros, urging efforts such as evaluating one’s own carbon footprint.

He recommended using purchasing power to choose sustainable seafood, reef-safe and ocean-safe sunscreens, avoiding single-use plastics, and of course, supporting eco-tourism through visiting or volunteering at the Aquarium of the Pacific. ■



A rainbow lorikeet at the Aquarium of the Pacific, Thursday, June 17, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.



Harpo the sea lion poses for guests at the Aquarium of the Pacific, Wednesday, June 23, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.



A child puts his hands on the glass of an exhibit, mirroring the pose of the blue poison dart frog within at the Aquarium of the Pacific, Thursday, June 17, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

State of the aquarium

(Continued from Page 1)

munity—including aquariums—lobbied for eligibility. The grant is for a percentage of missed revenue, which means the aquarium could be awarded up to \$7 million, Brown said.

“It’s pretty significant,” he said.

But the year did not start off very promising, Brown recalled. The 2021 budget was due in early fall, at which time aquarium leadership expected to be fully reopened by Jan. 1.

“And we weren’t. We weren’t even partially open,” Brown said, noting the extreme winter surge of COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths. “So we had a pretty big mess ... through March because our assumptions were wrong.”

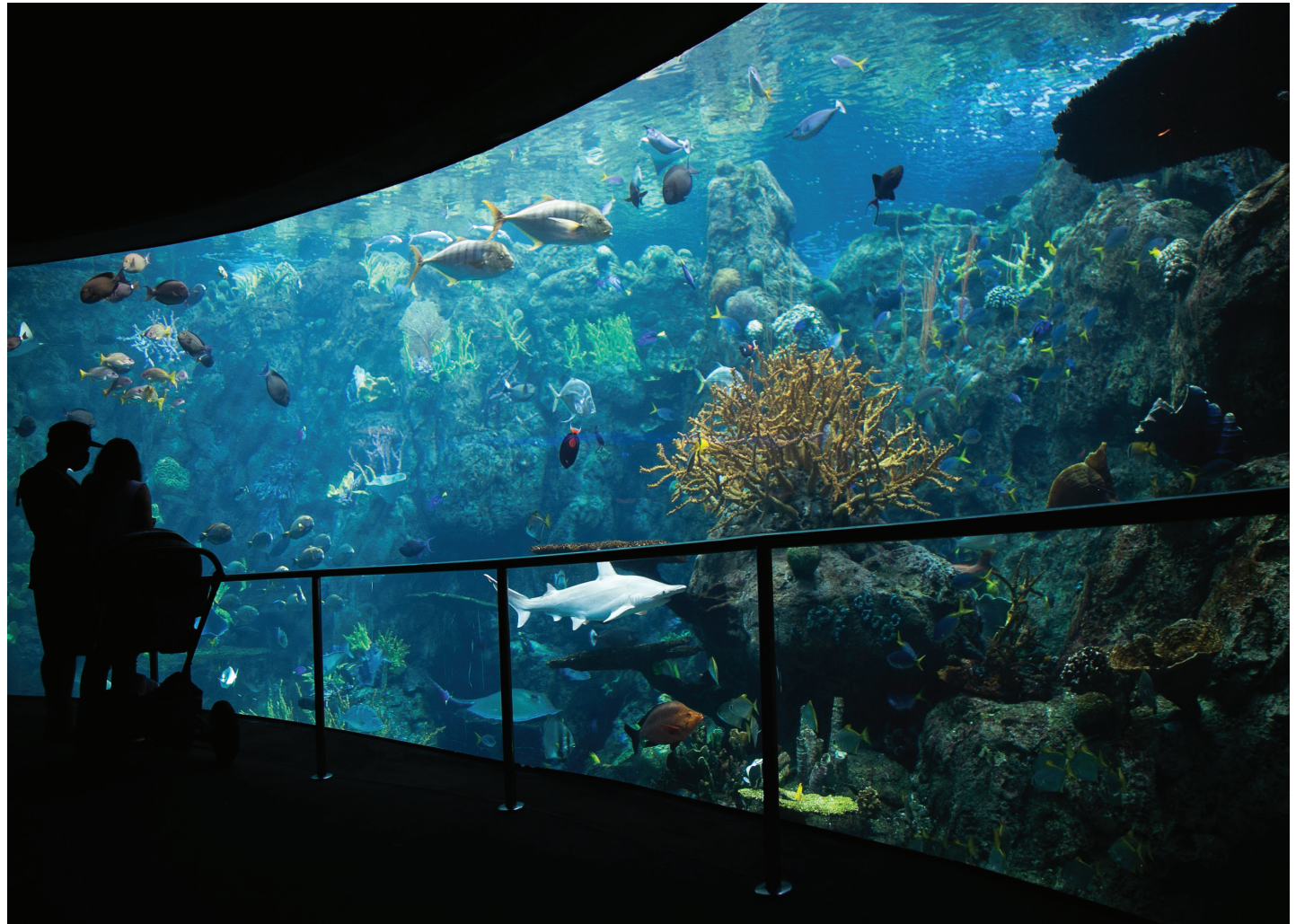
The aquarium approved a balanced \$31.8 million budgeted for 2021, meaning projected revenue was the same as projected expenses, Brown said. Anticipated January revenue was \$2.2 million but, because the aquarium was only open two days that month (outdoors only), the facility brought in less than \$1 million, most of which was donations, according to Brown.

The miscalculation for January threw the whole year into question, but since reopening—outdoors first, followed by indoors in mid-March, with limited capacity—the aquarium has been sold out most days, Brown said. Despite still only operating at 50% capacity, revenues have bounced back—through May, cash revenues reached \$14.2 million, \$2.6 million above budgeted revenues for that period.

There was one silver lining to the winter closure, Brown noted: The aquarium’s expenses through May came to \$10.8 million, \$1.7 million under budget with most savings coming from halting marketing and promotions while closed.

Weekend attendance is still well behind 2019 numbers but weekdays have been strong, according to Brown. “It’s really made the difference and helped us get through the first couple months,” he said.

Attendance for 2021 was project-



A couple and their baby watch the diverse marine life at the Aquarium of the Pacific on June 17, 2021. Photo by Tess Kazenoff.

ed at 1.2 million but Brown is unsure if they will hit that number due to the rough start to the year. Through May, attendance figures were 350,000 less than expected, he said. But numbers are trending up, Brown added, citing May attendance that was 22% above original projections.

“I’m confident we will continue to have a strong 2021,” Brown said, adding that he is concerned about budgeting for 2022. Once again, the new budget must be presented in the early fall and uncertainty about what the “new normal” will look like is making it difficult to make projections.

A strong year in the black would mean the aquarium can begin bringing back programs, more staff and rebuild reserves that were depleted during the

pandemic, Brown said. The aquarium’s operating reserves decreased from \$5.8 million to \$1.7 million and \$6 million of funding leftover from the recent expansion decreased from \$6 million to \$2.6 million.

Fortunately, with revenues above and expenses below projections, the aquarium already has begun rebuilding its reserves, Brown said. Since reopening in March, operating reserves have rebounded to \$4.3 million.

Prior to the pandemic, the aquarium had about 400 employees. Between layoffs and furloughs, staffing dropped to just over 200, Brown said, noting that many jobs had to continue regardless of whether the facility was open to the public. Today, staffing is back up to around 300, he said, noting that as ca-

capacity increases and programs return, so will staffing.

The last 15 months have been the most challenging in the aquarium’s 23-year history, Brown said—not just from a financial perspective but mentally and emotionally.

“There were some tough decisions we had to make and just the mental grind that weighed on everyone not knowing what was around the corner,” Brown said. “To come to an empty aquarium is mentally tough and the team did a lot to get through it. I can’t think of a tougher situation.”

“Unlike a museum that has art,” Brown added, “you can’t just throw a blanket over the exhibit and then dust it off when it’s time to reopen.” ■



A rainbow lorikeet looks at itself while a girl takes a picture at the Aquarium of the Pacific, Thursday, June 17, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.



A woman and child watch fish swim at the Aquarium of the Pacific on June 17, 2021. Photo by Tess Kazenoff.

New environmental documents revive controversial rail yard project

■ By **JASON RUIZ**
Reporter

A proposed rail yard near the Port of Los Angeles would increase pollution in parts of West Long Beach for the next 40 years, a new analysis shows.

A more “robust and accurate” pollution analysis was missing from the Southern California International Gateway project when it was first approved in 2013 leading to a judge blocking it in 2016, demanding an updated analysis on air quality and health effects be completed before the project could move forward.

The new draft environmental analysis that has been circulating since May 19 shows that diesel particulate matter and other pollutants would exceed state and federal standards in almost all versions of the project if it’s completed.

The analysis looked at effects from the project itself and in combination with the Union Pacific Intermodal Container Transfer Facility project to the north. However, opponents of the project say the documents are still flawed and don’t show the true impact of the proposed rail yard.

Julia Jonas-Day, a lawyer with the Natural Resources Defense Council, said during a recent public meeting that her organization opposed the project because of its disproportionate impacts on low-income communities of color, adding that the new analysis is inaccurate because it relies on 11-year-old data.

“This is illogical and results in misleading conclusions,” she said. “Many changes have occurred since 2010 that are relevant to the analysis from changes to the entities operating at the project site to changes in regulations affecting air quality.”

Diesel exhaust and particulate matter around the port complex have been linked to a spectrum of health issues including cancers and asthma. Long Beach has one of the highest rates of asthma in the country.

Several groups, including the city of Long Beach, Long Beach Unified School District and the South Coast Air Quality Management District, sued to block the project proposed by BNSF to be built at a site in Wilmington that borders West Long Beach schools, parks and residences.

The SCIG rail project is proposed to be built west of Hudson Park, Century Villages at Cabrillo and Cabrillo High School.

Laura Cortez, an organizer with East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice, said the revised documents show what groups like hers have been fighting against for over a decade; a project that will negatively impact communities of color already burdened by a combination of port and refinery pollution.

City data shows that residents living near the proposed project site have life expectancies at least seven years less



A map of the proposed rail project.

than residents living in East Long Beach and other less affected areas of the city.

“The main concern is that it will continue to create negative health impacts,” Cortez said. “It clearly states that it will increase pollution and that shouldn’t happen.”

Cortez said that a project of this magnitude should also have a longer public comment period than the current window that expires at the end of July. The only public meeting was held remotely last week.

A spokesperson for the Port of LA said there are no plans to hold another public meeting, in person or remotely, before the end of the comment period.

Much of the project has remained unchanged, but new analysis of pollutants has been added after a Contra County Superior Court judge ruled in 2016 that the project’s EIR was inadequate.

Completing the SCIG rail yard would create a 24-hour near-dock facility that could reduce truck traffic by shifting cargo traffic off of trucks and onto trains to make the journey to the BNSF Intermodal Terminal near the intersection of the 710 and 5 freeways in Los Angeles.

Currently trucks make that 20-mile trip, but port officials say this project would reduce truck routes to just 4 miles, reducing pollution caused by trucks.

The new court-ordered analysis looked at particulate matter and nitrogen dioxide, which gets into the air primarily by burning fuel and has been linked to asthma, diabetes, cancers, low birth weights and other health ailments.

Chris Cannon, the port’s director of environmental management, said that the project would concentrate these effects to a smaller area than current operations in and around the site, a position that had been challenged by opponents in the past because they believed future pollution rates without the project were overstated.

However, opponents say the new court-ordered revisions are still inadequate because the pollution projections are based on old data, like the Cal Cartage truck facility that is no longer in operation but is part of baseline pollution calculations. They said it could give the appearance that the pollution created by the project is less than it actually is.

The project faced sharp criticism from community members, environmental lawyers, doctors and an official from the South Coast Air Quality Management District, who alleged that the data in the document had just been turned over to the AQMD this week.

Ian MacMillan, a deputy executive officer for the district, said that at full build-out the residents of West Long

Beach and others bordering the project could be faced with even greater air pollution and bear even greater disproportionate health risks than they already do.

MacMillan asked the project developers this month to pledge to use the lowest emission rail equipment and trucks in the near term and to extend the public comment period.

A spokesperson from the district declined to comment further on the environmental report, stating the district was still reviewing the information.

Brian Ulaszewski, executive director of City Fabrick, a Long Beach nonprofit group that advocates for sustainable design and policy development, said that it’s hard to believe that the proposed project doesn’t have more zero emissions technology incorporated given the advancements made since the project was first approved in 2013.

“While on-dock rail is an essential part of the logistic network, near-dock rail also has a place within the system,” Ulaszewski said. “It just should be closer to the docks than to schools and residential neighborhoods.”

New rail projects at both the ports of LA and Long Beach have been moving forward in recent years as the complex continues to break monthly cargo records. Officials at the Port of Long beach have already begun publicly floating the idea of 24-hour operations being the future, and that future including more rail.

However, community advocates say that that future should not come at the expense of areas already hardest hit by pollution from the port, refineries and freeways.

Whether the city will intervene on behalf of residents like it did during the previous environmental review of SCIG is unclear. Mike Mais, an assistant city attorney with the city who headed the city’s fight against the project last decade, said the city is still reviewing the new environmental report.

“As of this moment in time we have not completed the review of this very technical document, particularly as it pertains to the air quality component,” Mais said in an email. “We will continue to closely monitor the project, and will respond accordingly as the project moves forward.”

Cortez said that with any luck the project won’t move forward.

East Yard organizers have actively opposed the SCIG project and others along the 710 Freeway corridor, including the 710-widening project that was paused by LA Metro officials earlier this year.

Cortez said she hopes that it doesn’t require another lawsuit and years of fighting the project for it to stop, but the communities are prepared for a fight.

“To us, this project is not happening. Period,” Cortez said. “Whatever we have to do to stop it, we’ll do that.”

Comments on the SCIG project can be submitted until July 30. ■

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The List of the July 13 edition of the Long Beach Business Journal will highlight Caregivers and Healthcare Heroes. To be included, please call us at 562-912-0161 or email ads@lbpost.com

‘Peru was born in me’: Waiter-turned-chef strives for authenticity with Casa Chaskis restaurant



Agustín Romo lights a saucepan on fire inside the kitchen of Casa Chaskis, a Peruvian restaurant in West Long Beach, on Thursday, June 17, 2021. Photo by Crystal Niebla.

■ By **CRYSTAL NIEBLA**
Reporter

Agustín Romo tosses arroz chaufa over a flame in a kitchen the size of two king-sized beds, illuminated only by a small window.

He opened Casa Chaskis in 2018 in West Long Beach, a Peruvian restaurant influenced by the Andes Mountain region, with dishes such as tallarines verdes (green noodles) and lomo saltados (stir-fried beef).

But this master Peruvian chef is actually Mexican, born in Jalisco and raised in Long Beach.

“That’s our dirty little secret,” he said, with a smile.

Romo, now in his 30s, said he fell in love with the food and the culture while working as a waiter years ago as a teen.

“I might not have been born in Peru, but Peru was born in me,” he said.

When Romo worked as a waiter at Wakatay Peruvian-Nikkei Restaurant in Gardena, he was first drawn by the smells of the food. He then began watching the cooks sauté in woks, typically used in Asian cooking.

Growing up with Jaliscan parents, seeing Latin food cooked so differently fascinated him. Peruvian gastronomy has been heavily influenced by an influx of Asian immigrants to the region

over centuries.

When Romo first tasted papa a la huancaína—a simple, saucy egg and potato dish—“it was love at first bite.”

After persistent begging for a teacher, Romo said, Ana Hiroko Narita, a Japanese Peruvian chef at the restaurant, agreed to take him under her wing. He’d called her Tía Hiroko (no relation) as a name of endearment. What followed was a lot of trial and error.

He’d cook the food all wrong, such as seco de cordero (lamb stew), he recalled—and Tía Hiroko would tell him so. She’d actually burst into laughter, he said, and “it motivated me more.”

She’d sit down with him and review how to fix his mistakes, such as using the correct bread or the duration of marinating different meats. “I wanted my food to come out exactly like hers,” he said. “I wanted to be just like her.”

And, eventually he improved—and she approved.

His first business venture was creating packs of Peruvian spices for amateur cooks, dubbed Chaskis Peruvian Seasonings. But after learning that people preferred to eat instead of cook, he delivered boxed lunches in Long Beach and Santa Ana, which is where the name “chaskis” comes from. Also spelled “chasquis,” it means “the

runners” of the Inca who would deliver messages during the 13th century.

Romo’s box lunches then evolved into food pop-ups. Simultaneously running a restaurant in Santa Ana, he still had ambition of having his own business. So, after saving enough money, he opened up Casa Chaskis on the Westside in December 2018.

“Every chef dreams of having their own,” he said.

Now, Romo’s trying his best to honor the Peruvian culture and be as authentic as possible.

For starters, he’s precise. Rather than pinching seasoning over the food with his hands, he’ll use a measuring spoon. He sautés his ingredients, such as rice and beef, with a skillful force of his wrist, spilling little to nothing out from his saucepan.

He also keeps his menu small, specializing in “simple, classic, home-cooked Peruvian food.” Vegetarian options are included.

One challenge he confronted: Peruvian chefs can’t easily find fresh ingredients at any supermarket, he said. To his dismay, it’s all frozen.

“Could you imagine making tacos with frozen, chopped cilantro?” he asked in comparison to making Mexican cuisine. Using frozen ingredients is “disgusting” and “has no flavor.”

As a remedy, some of the produce he uses is grown in his newly debuted kitchen garden, a piece of land situated behind his restaurant's parking lot. He grows citrus fruit, lettuce, kale, bell peppers and corn. In the patio section of his restaurant, he grows Peruvian herbs, such as huacatay (black mint) and ajis amarillo (yellow peppers), a star ingredient native from the Andes in Peru.

In love with culture, he taught himself about Peru's history and regions, he said. His favorite is the Andean region, which he reflects through the decor of the inside of his restaurant, from miniature alpacas to Andean style of hats with ear flaps called chullos. They also have a word of the day scribbled in chalk in Quechua, the indigenous language of Peru.

He said the biggest compliment a patron can give is a customer assuming he's a Peruvian native.

"It's so delicious," said Brian Michalkow, who came to eat at the restaurant on a recent weekday for the first time.

He learned about the restaurant through word of mouth. "It's that good," Michalkow said.

Casa Chaskis is located at 2380 Santa Fe Ave. ■



Agustín Romo holds a bowl of vegetables he picked from his kitchen garden behind Casa Chaskis, a Peruvian restaurant in West Long Beach, on Thursday, June 17, 2021. Photo by Crystal Niebla.

New venue space opens in West Long Beach as 'business hub' for local entrepreneurs to rent

■ By **CRYSTAL NIEBLA**
Reporter

After several years of pressing designs on hundreds of sweaters and creating other goods for sale, Myesia Lowery, 31, and Noel Russell IV, 36, said their Los Angeles area homes began to look more like workshops than places to live.

Lowery then noticed a for-rent sign on a newly painted building on Willow Street in West Long Beach, and when the rent dropped to something she could afford, she urged her cousin, Russell, who lives in Watts, to come take a look.

After seeing the space, he agreed to take their business venture—which consists of a little bit of everything, from making soap to juice and clothing—to the next level, and the two opened their doors about a month ago.

Though they still make goods and provide services (they also cook and sell food, offer massages and organize events), the two added a new service to their business: renting space for small-business owners like them.

The space, called Children of the Avenues (or C.O.T.A. for short), provides space at \$50 an hour for pop-ups such as food vendors and others to sell their goods and get the word out about their products.

They also rent shelf space ranging from \$75 to \$125 a month for local



Noel Russell, left, and Myesia Lowery share a laugh outside their new event venue, Children of the Avenues, in West Long Beach on Thursday, June 17, 2021. Photo by Crystal Niebla.

businesses to display their products to visitors.

"We like to call it a business hub kind of space," she said. "For people who don't have a space to do business, we're here for you."

Their mission is especially to serve Black-owned businesses and other people of color.

"We're seeing that our faces, Black and Brown, what have you, we're not really out there," Lowery said. And they play the role of consumers, sometimes they feel racially profiled in

stores or don't have access to products best suited for them, she said.

"We're just making sure we're making a community of people of color so that we can recycle our dollars ... and so we can feel comfortable going out shopping."

Earlier this month they hosted a mental health awareness event, Stress Free Experience, that highlighted coping with stress within the Black community. They also threw parties for Juneteenth and Father's Day.

For every event, they customize

furniture to meet the needs of the event. For hookah nights on Fridays, for example, they move decorative chairs and tables near their two front, boutique-looking windows and create different hookah sections, clusters of a table and chairs, inside the venue.

When they're not hosting events, they sell Creole food (Russell is originally from New Orleans), selling plates on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

And they also still sell bath products, apparel, Russell's rap group apparel and juices. Lowery also gives massages.

"I do it all," she said.

Russell admits they were worried about not surviving the pandemic, especially given that their business involves in-person gatherings.

"This spot was totally different," referencing the street during the pandemic. "It was dead at first and now there's traffic."

Lowery and Russell hope the space becomes a place that both supports businesses and builds community in West Long Beach. Lowery allows people to come by and just to hang out, lighting sage, hoping to make the space more inviting.

"Let's get together, let's get the community out, and let's make some money," Lowery said.

Children of the Avenues is located at 1924 W. Willow St. ■

‘Happy to be back’: Popular barber comes back home to West Long Beach



Shawdee Wilson, left, gives Prentice Gill a bald fade inside Blue City Blendz in West Long Beach on Wednesday, June 23, 2021. Photo by Crystal Niebla.

■ By **CRYSTAL NIEBLA**
Reporter

Award-winning barber Shawdee Wilson cuts the straightest lines, blends the smoothest fades, sharpens the strictist 90-degree angles, and carves intricate designs on any part of a cranium.

For years, his clients have remained loyal, citing his skills with the blades and clippers as well as his relatability.

“I can relate to almost anyone,” Wilson said, having grown up on the eastside and westside of Long Beach and being open to talk about anything: Sports, politics, uncomfortable questions, you name it.

Wilson, 39, set up shop at Blue City Blendz in West Long Beach in May.

When he moved from Long Beach to Bellflower for a barber job two decades ago, Long Beachers followed him there. Wilson even earned himself an award from The Cut,

a booking app, after booking 3,000 appointments for the year of 2020.

When an opportunity to work for the owner of Blue City Blendz on Willow Street between Seabright and Hayes avenues opened, Wilson took it.

“I’m happy to be back,” he said.

On average, he cuts hair for 18-20 people a day, most commonly the taper and bald fades. He can take as little as eight minutes or as long as an hour, but the cuts are never difficult for this skilled barber.

“The cut’s only hard when the client is hard,” he said. “That’s when the frustration kicks in.”

Arizona State University football coach Prentice Gill, who recently visited Wilson, didn’t seem to have any problems. Wilson gave him a bald fade. Gill has received haircuts from Wilson on and off between living in Carson and Arizona for about five years.

The first time Wilson cut his hair, Gill’s



A man walks toward the entrance of Blue City Blendz, a recently opened barbershop in West Long Beach on Wednesday, June 23, 2021. Photo by Crystal Niebla.

reaction wasn’t important, even if he liked it.

“It was about everyone else’s reaction,” Gill said with a grand smile, referencing the fans of his haircut on social media.

For Wilson, the transformations give him satisfaction.

Cutting hair takes a lot of concentration; Wilson lowers his head to inspect angles, habitually shrugging his shoulders to loosen any stiffness: “I like making people look different.”

Love for the craft came to him as a young boy at 13 when he first picked up his older brother’s clippers and tried a simple haircut on his friend. Since then, he was known around the neighborhood in Long Beach for “giving them those classic kitchen cuts.”

For now, it’s just Wilson and another barber at the shop, so they’re quite busy, he said. Being a licensed barber, he also cuts women’s hair too, of course. He hopes to bring in two more barbers in a few months, and it

can’t just be anyone.

“The process is more rigorous than you would think,” he said, referencing the juggle between technique and personality. “You want to keep a positive vibe ... You just want to make sure you’re finding the right fit.”

On a full day at the shop, there’s usually jokes and good conversations. “In the barber shop, we talk about everything. We come here to vent.”

The shop is adorned with blue paint dominating a mural of some of Wilson’s role models and Long Beach landmarks, including Nipsey Hussle, the late Kobe Bryant and the VIP Records and 710 freeway signs. Long Beach singer and rapper Nate Dogg is on there too, who Wilson said was a relative of his.

“What I’m doing is for the community, so that people have a place to relax, unwind, and AC,” he added. “Good cuts, good vibes.” ■

Westside moratorium

(Continued from Page 1)

of Development Services, said that process was expected to take five years and had already been completed in the two districts in North Long Beach, but agreed with Uranga’s concern over the lack of services on the west side of the city.

While housing is allowed and encouraged in the Land Use Element, the plan for those two corridors calls for housing developers to incorporate neighborhood-serving retail like restaurants, grocery stores and other businesses at street level with housing on other floors.

Koontz and Uranga said that development of single-family homes along the corridor takes up space that could be occupied by businesses in the future. Both corridors will be zoned for a maximum of three stories of development.

“There wasn’t a lot, but it wasn’t zero,” Koontz said of applications for residential construction along the two corridors. “We’ve had a handful over the last three years. I think for a community that’s very small and doesn’t have a lot of retail, the opportunity cost of losing even one to three of those sites is large.”



A lone single-family home sits next to a multi-use building on the corner of Santa Fe Avenue and Hill Street with multifamily buildings sitting on each of the other three corners of the intersection, Tuesday, June 22, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

The zoning process is expected to take months, if not the whole year, Koontz said. The department has to hold public meetings, adhere to noticing requirements for public participation and place items on city agendas, which will eat up months of time.

His department also has to examine data and get people out and into the area to understand the issue before it can create

a solution.

“It’s 90-120 days of staff work to do this work, but I don’t have anyone to assign to it today,” Koontz said. “That’s why the councilman is giving us the full year to get it done and we’re committed to get it done by the end of the year.”

Tony Bell, president of Westside Elevate, a neighborhood group dedicated to revitalizing the local economy and other

quality of life improvements, is in full support of the moratorium.

Bell explained that there are no banks and limited shopping options west of the Los Angeles River, which means his family must make the trek east to go grocery shopping or go to a pharmacy.

With a family of three kids sometimes you need supplies quickly, and that’s not always possible given the current options, Bell said. The issue was further highlighted for him when he recently had surgery and neither his partner, who doesn’t drive, or Instacart, could bring him the medical supplies he needed while he was recovering.

“I was basically having to beg people when they got off work to pick up medical supplies for me from the Walgreens way over on Long Beach Boulevard,” Bell said.

Bell said that a grocery store would be an ideal addition to either corridor, but so would a bank, something the community has called for for years.

“We’re not against having other people coming into the area and living here, but we need it to be balanced,” Bell said. “And that’s what zoning is supposed to do.” ■

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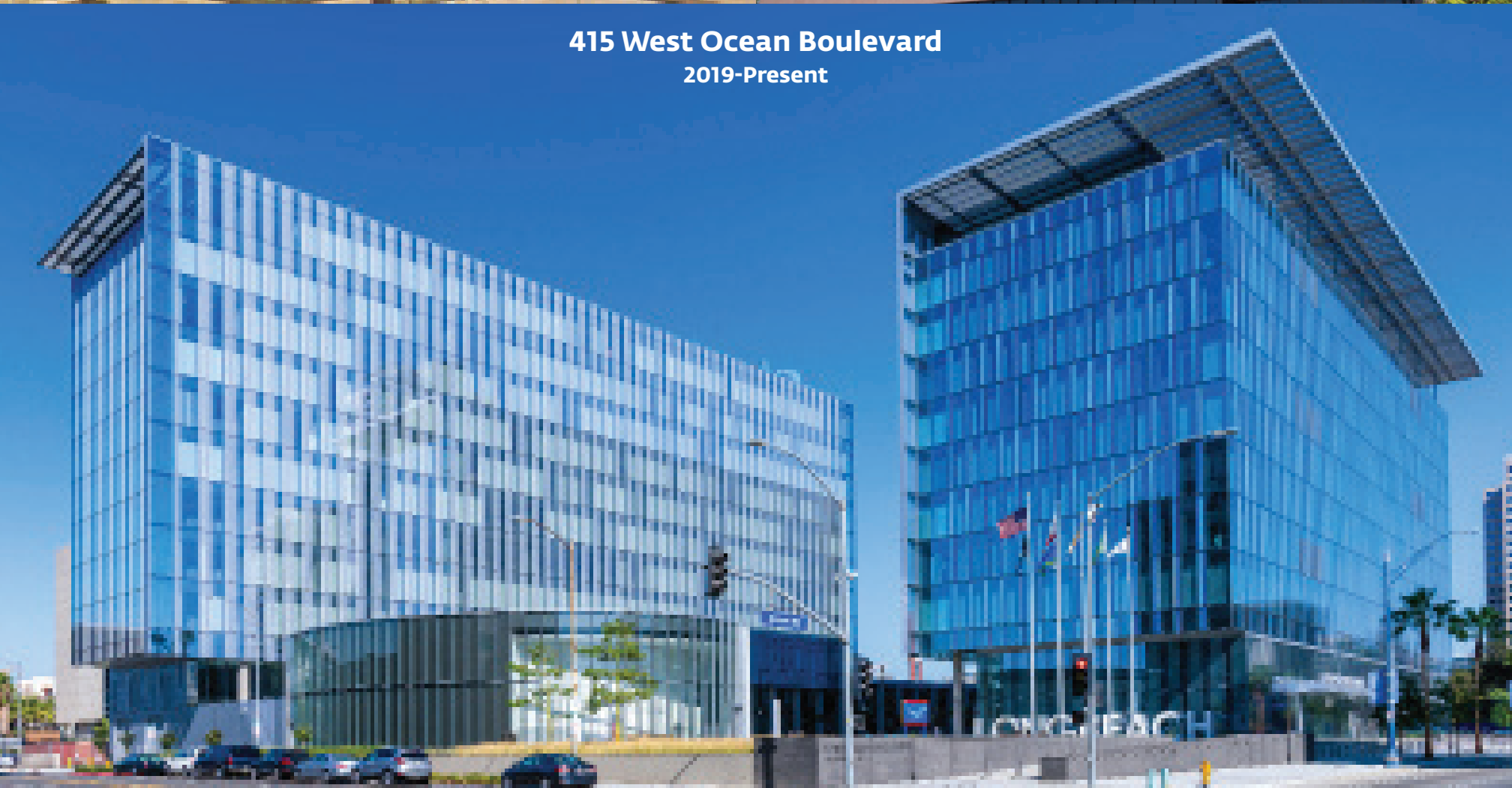
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