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Long Beach Community Foundation President and CEO Marcelle Epley stands outside the Nonprofit Center, a building the organization owns and leases to local charities at a reduced rate, Thursday, Dec. 9, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

# Q&A: LONG BEACH COMMUNITY FOUNDATION CEO TALKS NONPROFITS, HOLIDAY GIVING

BY BRANDON RICHARDSON / Reporter

*Long Beach Community Foundation President and CEO Marcelle Epley discusses the challenges nonprofit organizations have faced since the onset of the pandemic, why the holidays see a surge in giving, what issues are most important as Christmas approaches and best practices for making donations.*

*The interview has been edited for space considerations.*

**BRANDON RICHARDSON:** The past 21 months have been difficult for everyone, and I’m sure nonprofit organizations were not immune. Can you talk about some of the challenges nonprofits have faced since March 2020?

**MARCELLE EPLEY:** Fundraising

for charities has been an issue since the onset of the pandemic. Many of them were successful in looking at different ways to fundraise, many of them were successful in receiving the federal Payroll Protection Plan stimulus funds, and others had a very good database of existing donors they could reach out to for support. Others weren’t as successful and had to close programs or eliminate or reduce staffing levels. I think the larger organizations ... figured out how they could survive under the circumstances and provide services and gain funding. But there are some that had to significantly downsize.

**BR:** Of course, nonprofits always are facing an uphill battle. What are other challenges nonprofits face?

**ME:** Even [before] March 2020, the No. 1 issue that charities face consistently is funds for basic operations. When charities are applying for grant funding, even from us, it’s challenging for them to fund their basic administration. The grants they apply for are to provide programming. But underneath the programs are the administrative costs that go into running the organization. And those dollars are very hard to find. If someone ... knew the organization they wanted to give to, but weren’t sure how or what to give, I would encourage them to give to general operations.

In the last two years, there’s been a large shift in leadership. It seems to come in waves—every five-to-10 years,

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## COVID-19 funding provided boon for local banks

BY BRANDON RICHARDSON / Reporter

When COVID-19 emerged in early 2020, it threw every business and individual in Long Beach—and the world—into a perpetual fog of uncertainty that still has yet to fully lift.

The same was true for financial institutions, including Farmers & Merchants and International City banks, according to executives.

“From the beginning, we had some very important decisions to make,” F&M CEO Dan Walker said. “Do we close all of our banks? Do we leave them open?”

Ultimately, F&M leadership determined their 26 locations—from San Clemente to Santa Barbara—and employees were essential to the communities they serve. Staff with remote-friendly jobs began working from home (the bank purchased around 400 computers for these employees),

*Continued on page 4*

## Port of Long Beach spends millions on community grants; some residents want more

BY BRANDON RICHARDSON / Reporter

The Port of Long Beach has long been an economic engine for the city—but it’s also contributed to pollution and poor health outcomes for the communities that live nearby.

In recognition of that reality, the facility has worked to minimize its environmental and health impacts. In 2006, the port, along with its Los Angeles counterpart, adopted the Clean Air Action Plan, and ever since, the twin ports have pushed long-term initiatives to work toward zero-emission operations. Many of the programs and plans, though take years—decades, even—to implement, and impacts on residents don’t lessen with only good intentions.

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The Roland Sands Design retail space at the company's new joint headquarters with Sweatpants Media Friday, Dec. 3, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

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Demand for new mortgages—and refinancing—is still strong

BY HAYLEY MUNGUIA / Editor

The Long Beach housing market appears to be cooling slightly from its pandemic peak—at least as far as pricing goes. But lenders say interest in home finance is still strong.
“My business has been—it’s been explosive,” said Greg Fox, a regional manager for America’s Home Loans in Long Beach. “It’s probably been the best two years I’ve had in a long time.”
While buyer fatigue and the typical seasonal downturn in home-buying may mean folks face less competition for any given property, Fox and others said it’s still clearly a seller’s market. Low interest rates continue to make home-buying—and refinancing—attractive.
Adam Evans is a loan officer with Long Beach Home Loan who focuses mostly on refinancing. He said that while low interest rates are always a good incentive for people to refinance their homes, the uptick in forbearance plans—in which lenders allow homeowners to temporarily lower or pause payments—during the pandemic has also driven people to rework their mortgages.

“We’re dealing with a lot of people who have had forbearance, and now they’re refinancing out of it,” Evans said. “I have clients that didn’t make a payment for a year on a \$300,000 mortgage, and they’ve added \$50,000 in forbearance payments.”
While the housing boom of the last two years may, by some metrics, look eerily similar to the market in 2006 and 2007, Evans and Fox both said they don’t believe this is another bubble about to burst.
In addition to the loans themselves being more sound this time around, Evans said, “we kind of learned from that, and what the [Federal Reserve] did—what the government did this time was say, ‘We’re not going to let anyone default.’ So the way the situation was handled was completely different.”
“Am I concerned in terms of the values rising and things like that?” he continued. “For me, it’s more of a bigger economic picture.”



A house for sale in the Los Altos neighborhood Tuesday, Nov. 23, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

Evans said, the way he sees it, the financial relief that has allowed people to avoid foreclosures has also driven up prices—not just in the housing market, but with inflation more generally.
“The prices in housing, in my opinion, isn’t rising as much by supply and demand,” he said, “as much as it’s rising by the monetary policy that’s been put in place, where we’ve been pushing so much money in the system.”
Fox, though, sees it differently.
“I think that a lot of people jumped into the market who have been sitting on the sidelines,” he said. “As long as there is very, very low inventory, then it’s not a bubble, because there are still consumers. There are still people who want to buy.”
“As long as inventory is low, we’re not going to see a downturn,” Fox said.

“That might happen in other places in the country, but this is Southern California.”
That’s not to say, though, that prices will keep skyrocketing on the same trajectory as they have been.
“My personal opinion is: It’s a little crazy. It’s a little absurd,” Fox said of the current market. “But this is California. Everybody wants to be in California. So I don’t think we’re going to see, necessarily, a downturn, per se. I think we just might see some stabilization right now in the markets, as far as pricing of housing. I think we’re going to see sideways movement for a while.”
Of course, interest rates have always been a major factor in demand in the housing market.
While rates have crept up from their mid-pandemic lows, the average of

roughly 3% for a 30-year mortgage in early December was still near a historical bottom for the industry. But concerns about rising inflation likely mean rates will continue to grow. For Fox and Evans, the key question is: How quickly?
“I don’t think interest rates are going to be able to rise too much,” Evans said. “There’s a lot of debt—a lot of corporate debt, and I think right now, with monetary policy—the Fed is walking this tightrope. On one end, we’re fighting inflation. On the other end, we’re fighting all this debt that’s been created.”
“If rates go up too high, and all these corporations and people have to service this debt,” he added, then the narrative becomes, “We have to let people go.

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COVID-19

Continued from cover

and the rest remained at their respective posts to provide financial assistance to residents and businesses alike.

At one point, as many as 50% of F&M employees were working from home, Walker said. About 30% of F&M staff are still working from home, he added. For those working inside branches throughout the pandemic, Walker said he is proud to call them frontline workers.

F&M’s decision to remain open turned into a financial gain for the regional institution. On Jan. 1, 2020, F&M had \$7.6 billion in total assets, according to Walker. Fast forward to today, and the bank’s assets have grown nearly 53% to \$11.6 billion, he said.

International City Bank also saw substantial gains throughout the pandemic, according to Community President Paula-Rose Wihongi. The local bank saw its assets grow over 40% from \$366 million in December 2019 to \$513 million as of September.

The infusion of money through the various business and individual stimulus funds boosted F&M and other institutions, Walker and Wihongi said.

“We were one of the first banks in the state of California to begin accepting applications and funding PPP loans,” Walker said. “In the beginning, we were the No. 1 funding bank in the state.”

When the program was announced, F&M vowed to fund 100% of qualifying applications, Walker said, a guarantee larger banking institutions did not make.

F&M was successful in that venture. Walker recalled one instance where an employee approved a loan for \$256 meant to cover rent, pay an employee and keep a business afloat.

“I scolded my employee for funding that loan because it cost me \$400 to fund and collect,” Walker said, laughing. “I said, ‘Next time you get one for \$256, call me and I’ll just write them a check.’”

Within the first 100 days, F&M funded 4,500 loans for a total of \$764 million, Walker said. In the second round, the bank backed an additional 2,350 loans totalling \$376 million.



A man walks past Farmers & Merchants’ Downtown Long Beach branch at Third Street and Pine Avenue Thursday, Dec. 9, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

While some stimulus loans were up to \$8 million, Walker said about 75% were for \$150,000 or less.

While the stimulus packages accounted for about \$4 billion of F&M’s growth, the other \$3 billion came from a new customer base and existing customers, Walker said.

ICB’s focus is small business, Wihongi said, so the start of the pandemic sparked fear for its customers at the bank. But the government came through for entrepreneurs with the PPP, she said.

“It gave small businesses a shot in the arm,” Wihongi said. “And as the pandemic prolonged, our small businesses pivoted very well.”

ICB completed about 192 PPP loans totaling about \$40 million, Wihongi said.

Small local and regional banks are important because they have a vested interest in the success of the communities they serve, Wihongi said. The employees and executives of these institutions often live in the area and patronize the businesses, meaning they understand the local needs and climate better than corporate banks, she said.

That understanding and presence allows local and regional banks to form stronger and more insightful relationships, Wihongi said.

The pandemic forced F&M to expand its digital footprint, Walker said, noting that comprehensive mobile banking became even more important over the last two years. But cell phones can never fully replace employees, he said.

At the start of the pandemic, F&M had 785 employees. Today, that number declined to 760, according to Walker, who said employees left at a regular rate for normal reasons—moving out of state, entering a new field and retiring.

“We haven’t been able to replace them as quickly as they dropped off, but I didn’t have a mass resignation,” Walker said, adding that the bank has not mandated COVID-19 vaccinations. “We recognize the relationship, the face-to-face, is still greater than what we can accommodate and complement from the digital side.”

And the company’s focus on personalized customer service has paid off. Last year, the first, second and third quarters saw a 48% increase in new accounts year-over-year, according to spokeswoman Amanda Ernest Fuller. Of those new accounts, 47% were business-related.

With many economists anticipating the Federal Reserve to begin raising

interest rates as early as July of next year, Walker said inflation is a key deciding factor to watch.

“If inflation continues to rise, they’re going to pick the interest rates up a little bit earlier,” Walker said. “But I suspect the inflation we’re seeing right now will slip off. So we’ll probably be in the fourth quarter when the interest rates start to increase.”

When interest rate hikes do begin, Walker said it would be so gradual that the impacts would not be felt immediately.

The looming threat of increased interest rates, however, could result in a boom in lending even before the year’s end, Wihongi said. Ahead of increased interest rates, Wihongi said it’s common to see an uptick in real estate deals.

“Lending increases because people want to buy now when the rates are low to lock them in,” Wihongi said. “We’ve seen that happen in cycles over and over again.”

The cause of the cycle—the pandemic—is not normal, Wihongi admitted, but she still expects the same behaviors from business owners.

Even if that lending spike never materializes, ICB is closing out the year on high note following its merger with Indiana-based United Fidelity Bank, which was completed on Nov. 30. Wihongi stressed that the transition would not alter the bank or its mission in any way. In fact, she said, the merger will allow ICB to make larger loans and offer services it previously did not, including the money-transfer program Zelle.

“We are so entrenched in this community, we’re not going anywhere,” Wihongi said. “Our culture remains the same; our focus is still on the Long Beach community. That will not change.” ■

FROM THE EDITOR: How will Biden’s signature bills impact business in Long Beach?

BY HAYLEY MUNGUIA / Editor

As he hit the largely virtual campaign trail last year, then-presidential candidate Joe Biden homed in on an alliterative message to the nation: Under his watch, the U.S. would “build back better” in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

Now, his first year in office is drawing to a close, and it appears the Senate may be on the verge of passing his campaign’s namesake bill. The House of Representatives adopted the \$2 trillion proposal—which would make significant investments in education, health care, efforts to combat climate change and more—in November, and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) said early last week that he hopes to pass the bill by Christmas.

If approved, the Build Back Better Act would follow the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act as Biden’s second signature piece of legislation. Taken together, the two bills could impact millions of Americans, with different groups reportedly benefiting from the myriad provisions, which include investments in transportation, the power grid and internet access, along with authorizing universal pre-K, offering new aid to low-income families and expanding Medicare coverage, to name a few.

But the bills would also have significant tax implications for wealthier Americans and for corporations. I was curious about what this all could mean for businesses in Long Beach—how local businesses would be impacted, and also how they would benefit. So I reached out to some experts to get a better sense of what Biden’s signature packages would mean here.

In terms of the broader question of who will be affected, the simplest answer is: It depends.

“The impact on different businesses is going to depend on the type of industry they are in, their financials, including whether or not they have equity partners, whether they have debt outstanding, what kind of tax deductions they are eligible for and what kind of workforce they are employing,” Laura Gonzalez, an associate professor of finance at Cal State Long Beach, told me.

In terms of specific provisions, the one aspect of the infrastructure bill that’s likely to have the most impact locally, according to Tax Prose agent and tax coach Stephanie Anderson, is the early termination of the employee retention credit. The credit, which was put into place in the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, encouraged employers to maintain staffing levels by offsetting some of the cost of wages. It was slated to last through the end of the year, but the infrastructure bill moved back the cutoff date to the end of September.

“I would bet that many of our local Long Beach businesses have been surviving the pandemic with the help of the employee retention credit,” Anderson told me. “So I think that’s going to have

a big impact on our local economy here.”

The Build Back Better bill, meanwhile, has broader changes in store.

“As far as the infrastructure bill and how it would impact Long Beach, it’s mainly going after larger businesses,” Anderson said. “The Build Back Better bill, if that’s enacted, will have a bigger impact on our local businesses because it’s going to be a sweeping tax change.”

“In 2017, we had [the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act] and we had to change everything,” Anderson added. “Business owners, tax professionals—it greatly impacted us. So [Build Back Better] will greatly impact us at that level again.”

Some of the tax changes for businesses in the Build Back Better bill include a 15% minimum tax on companies with more than \$1 billion in book income, a 1% surtax on corporate stock buybacks and raising the effective tax rate for foreign earnings on assets like patents and trademarks to 15%.

“But the biggest change is going to be in tax administration and enforcement,” Anderson said. The bill would increase investment in “compliance to the tax laws and the enforcement of them. They’re going to double down on it, so audits are going to increase—and the IRS wins most of the audits.”

So taxes—at least for big businesses—will go up, and the government will keep a closer eye on making sure everyone pays their fair share. But that’s not to say those same businesses won’t also benefit from the new laws.

Gonzalez, with CSULB, told me that some of the benefits of investing in infrastructure are obvious: It makes the movement of goods more efficient, and people can travel more easily—whether it’s for business or leisure. But there are bigger picture advantages that business owners in particular may appreciate.

“It has become a national priority to support businesses and also to be able to compete internationally with China,” she said. “China has been moving very aggressively in the modernization of their infrastructure, so they have a very extensive network of high speed trains, they’re improving internet access and more.”

“In order to keep up with our rivals—both political and economic—we do need to invest in our infrastructure,” Gonzalez added, “and that is not just roads, highways, etc. It also involves internet infrastructure, for example, the access to services online.”

Not everyone, though, sees the new legislation as a package of smart investments.

James Refalo, a professor in Cal State LA’s finance and law department, told me that while the Build Back Better bill may seem beneficial on its face, the way it was written will likely cost far more in the long term—and reduce the country’s economic output—than its price tag implies.

That’s because many of the social spending provisions—like universal pre-K, for instance—only last a few years. The tax provisions, however, are

permanent, which Refalo said serves to artificially lower the official cost of the bill overall.

“They’re increasing social spending considerably, creating entitlement programs, and what they’re doing to make it look far less costly than it is,” he said, “is a lot of these have sunsets, and that way they get around the analysis of the Congressional Budget Office to where it looks more tax-neutral than it is.”

“I can’t emphasize enough: Once you create programs like this, it’s very hard to turn them off, and that is because it’s like Social Security or Medicare,” Refalo continued. “Way back when Social Security was created, Roosevelt said, ‘I’m going to create a program they’re never going to be able to get rid of,’ and they never could.”

Refalo pointed to an analysis by the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania that found that while the bill as written would be close to cost-neutral, the cost if most of the spending provisions were permanent would be more than double the revenue brought in over the same time frame. The federal debt, meanwhile, would be 25.2% higher and GDP would be 2.8% lower in 2050, relative to current law, the analysis found.

“As far as social spending, here was

a point made by Wharton,” Refalo said. “There are certain programs such as the pre-K provisions, that, at the margin, might increase workforce participation and increase GDP, but their comment in there is they thought the contribution would be relatively small as opposed to the increase in cost.”

So, what I gleaned from all of these conversations may not be the most novel takeaway. But it essentially boiled down to: What this all means for Long Beach depends on your perspective.

Mayor Robert Garcia, for example, has touted how the infrastructure bill funds will be put to work locally. The Long Beach Airport, he tweeted earlier this month, “is poised to receive millions of dollars to complete our modernization plans that include a new transit center and baggage areas.”

Local businesses, meanwhile, may lose out on a helpful tax credit or have a higher chance of being audited. They also may benefit from more efficient movement of goods or a boost in workforce participation thanks to universal pre-K.

What’s clear, though, is that these bills will have an impact. Will they help the country “build back better”? We may just have to wait and see. ■



An International City Bank customer uses the ATM on the corner of Long Beach and Ocean boulevards Thursday, Dec. 9, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.



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# City’s projected \$36 million budget deficit likely to shrink

BY JASON RUIZ / Reporter

Spurred by changes in consumer purchasing habits during the pandemic and the historic prices of home sales, the Long Beach City Council could be dealt a smaller budget deficit to balance next September than the originally projected \$36 million shortfall.

While the city’s financial management team did not commit to a number during the City Council’s Dec. 7 meeting, it broadly agreed that when it comes back to the council in March 2022 with an update on the budget situation, the projected shortfall could be substantially smaller.

Long Beach was able to postpone the coronavirus pandemic’s economic hit in 2021 because of \$250 million in federal and state COVID-19 recovery aid.

However, next year it will likely have to make cuts to balance its annual budget if outside aid comes to an end. While there is optimism that there will be less than \$36 million in necessary cuts by the time the budget is approved in September, the sheer size of the deficit could mean that cuts will still be required to balance the budget.

“It is important to be cautious that the magnitude of the starting shortfall could still require some tough decisions,” said Grace Yoon, a budget manager for the city.

A big point of concern for the city could be the litigation over Measure M, a 2018 voter-approved tax on water and sewer services in the city; an appellate court ruled against Long Beach in the case earlier this month.

Losing the Measure M revenue could mean a \$9 million annual hit to the general fund, and potentially a \$24 million one-time loss for revenue the city has already spent. However, the city intends to take the case to the California Supreme Court—and a win there could free up some funds that the city would otherwise be forced to set aside if it lost the lawsuit.

Even with Measure M funds, the city’s annual budget consistently produces a long list of services and departments that are underfunded. The city will also have to simultaneously balance next year’s budget while negotiating new contracts with the city’s police, fire and lifeguard unions.

Two of the biggest reasons the shortfall could be smaller in the March 2022 update are sales and property taxes, Long Beach Director of Financial Management Kevin Ripper explained during the Dec. 7 meeting.

Higher-end homes selling for higher prices have reset the amount of property taxes that the new owners will pay. The city receives about 21% of property taxes assessed to homeowners.

Ripper also said that the pandemic caused a shift in consumer habits

because closures forced them to pivot to buying more taxable goods, which could help bolster the city’s general fund.

“On net, the general fund is doing better,” Ripper said.

Other sources of revenue like hotel and short-term rental taxes, parking citations and park fees are performing worse, but those funds are much smaller and less consequential to the city’s overall budget when compared to revenue collected from property tax, sales tax, cannabis sales and permit fees, which are trending up.

One factor that could also shape the projected shortfall presented to the council in March is a change in philosophy from the financial management team. It had been working under a more conservative approach that often projected revenue figures that turned out to be much smaller than their actual year-end totals.

Ripper, who was appointed earlier this year, said the team would be using a “reasonable expectation” approach going into this budget cycle.

Long Beach leaders seemed

optimistic that the city could see a turnaround similar to that of other agencies, including the state of California, which is now projecting a surplus of \$31 billion, a year after projecting a \$54 billion deficit.

“When you’re looking at sales tax especially, what this council should feel good about is that the number is going to be lower that the council is going to have to wrestle with,” Mayor Robert Garcia said.

The budget process typically starts in July with the release of the proposed budget that serves as the basis for the final budget adopted in September. However, this year the city will begin meeting with the public in January to gauge its priorities for the upcoming budget.

Yoon said there are four public meetings that will be scheduled in January 2022 in addition to a survey that will be circulated to gather feedback from the community. That feedback will be bundled with a revised projection for the budget deficit that will be presented to the City Council in March. ■

## Mortgage

Continued from page 3

We have to change our business model because rates went up.’ It has a ripple effect that can cause really big damage to the recovery.”

Fox also acknowledged the tricky spot the Fed now finds itself in.

“The government’s kind of damned if they do, damned if they don’t,” Fox said of bringing up interest rates. “In the past, we have seen certain times when there has been a dramatic and violent spike up of interest rates, and when that happens ... the real estate market just completely comes to a crashing halt. Refinances die in a day. Things literally just stop until things normalize again.”

“I’m extremely fearful of spikes like that,” he added. “A gradual rise in interest rates—it all depends on what’s happening with inflation, but in the economy, I think everything’s a little bit too sensitive and a little bit too weak for us to see a sharp increase of interest rates. If there’s a slow escalation over time, that’s acceptable.”

In the meantime, though, interest in either getting a mortgage or refinancing has stayed strong—a nd Fox hopes that will remain the case.

“I hope we have a good, strong 2022,” Fox said. “I’ve been going gangbusters, nonstop, for two years now, and I hope it continues. I really do.” ■

# Reversing the exodus of the Great Resignation

Highly successful businesses retain employees by making them owners



Thirty years ago this year, Craig Danley and his business partner, Richard Vance II, launched Delta Pipeline Inc. They began in La Verne, California and eventually opened an office in Long Beach in 1995.

Working in both the public and private sectors, their projects include redevelopment and new construction of schools, medical buildings, retail, office and industrial space.

From the start, they frequently shared profits with their employees as a way for them to participate in the growing construction company's success.

It seems a natural fit that in 2017, Delta Pipeline became employee-owned through an ESOP (Employee Stock Ownership Plan). An ESOP is a qualified retirement plan used to transfer all or part of the company's stock to a trust where employees accrue shares as a retirement benefit.

ESOPs and other forms of employee ownership give employees a direct stake in the company's growth. This makes them a powerful tool to recruit and retain employees and help reverse the tide of the Great Resignation.

The majority of small businesses in Long Beach, like those around the U.S., are still feeling the impact of the pandemic. Many businesses are struggling to keep their employees engaged and hopeful for a prosperous future.

These challenges are layered on top of an ownership succession crisis that was already unfolding. Baby boomers own nearly half of all businesses with employees in the Los Angeles metro area. Those business owners are set to retire in record numbers, and most do not have

succession plans.

Nonprofit organization Project Equity analyzed the number of privately-held companies in Long Beach that have employees and are 20 years or older — a good indication that they need succession planning.

These companies:

- Represent over 2,500 businesses
- Employ approximately 46,700 individuals
- Generate over \$12.3B in revenue

Without succession plans, many of these businesses could close with immense economic impact. That was precisely the scenario Danley wanted to avoid when he chose to make Delta Pipeline employee-owned. He wanted to protect his legacy, reward his employees and ensure the company remained a vibrant part of the Long Beach community.

“With employee ownership, you get to be better,” Danley said. “You get to grow. And it's not only about your retirement. It's about what happens to you while you're building a company as an owner. It changes the way you actually interact with your colleagues, your family, your supervisor and your community. It's an incredible experience.”

Employee ownership builds employee engagement, as well as employee wealth. According to the National Center of Employee Ownership, workers at employee-owned businesses make 53% higher incomes than those working in traditional businesses.

Jobs at employee-owned companies are often more stable, even in times of upheaval.

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“If you're an owner, and you do not have a succession plan yet, it's never too early to start,” Danley said. “It's a big bet to think that somebody's just going to buy what we created. You might get lucky. It might go for a big discount, who knows, but then you're going to be working for somebody for a while.”

To ensure your business is prepared with succession planning, and to learn more about employee ownership, reach out to Project Equity at [project-equity.org/free-consultation](https://project-equity.org/free-consultation).

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Maleka Chris, founder of Love Beyond Limits, on her wedding day with her husband Jimmy and four daughters, (from left to right), Makaila, Maleka, Terica and Jordynn. Her daughters have played a role in Chris' development of the programs and services offered by Love Beyond Limits. Photo courtesy of Maleka Chris.



Youth participants and theme winners from a Rotary District 5280 event. Photo courtesy of Maleka Chris.



Students from Roosevelt Middle School at a Strong Youth Strong Community Event in 2019 with Maleka Chris and a coach. Photo courtesy of Maleka Chris.

# Long Beach nonprofit seeks to improve children's lives

BY TESS KAZENOFF / Reporter

When Love Beyond Limits started in Maleka Chris's living room in 2010, the idea was to provide a safe space for kids. Chris had video games and basketball, and even trampolines—the hope was also to be the “fun house” that her four daughters would want to hang out at instead of at their friends' homes.

“Once I realized I had their attention, I was like, ‘Hey, this will work,’” said Chris.

Since officially becoming a nonprofit in 2013, Chris has developed numerous youth-oriented programs and workshops while making a new home in the Long Beach Community Foundation building. In 2019, the organization won Nonprofit of the Year in the 64th Assembly district.

A cornerstone of Love Beyond Limits' programming is the 13 Stones program for middle schoolers and high schoolers. The program focuses on life skills, and even includes a component that caregivers can participate in as well.

Each week of the 13-week program focuses on one stone, ranging from respect, self-esteem, and accountability, to exploring roles of a child, father, and mother, many of which are based on lessons Chris wished she had learned as a child.

“It was things I needed, and questions I needed answered, (but) because I didn't get it, I'd rather try to help somebody else get it as opposed to blaming the world or blaming my parents or blaming society, why things went wrong in my life or why I didn't have this,” said Chris. “Coming up with solutions is better.”

The goal is for participants to walk away with self-confidence and the ability to better process emotions. Improved communication between youth and their caregivers is also emphasized, with conflict resolution being a large component of the work.

While it isn't possible to change having an absent parent, or a child being in a parent's role with siblings, acknowledging their experiences and struggles is key to growing past the trauma and pain, said Chris.

“If you have someone constantly questioning the dynamic of their family, constantly questioning the dynamic of what they have to endure, with no answers, that's what causes, I believe, the pain and the anger and the frustration,” she said.

While in the program, students participate in group discussions, complete reading and writing assignments, and get

to attend a wellness retreat.

Ultimately, the goal is to be better for themselves, for their families and for their communities, said Chris, and this is evident through the other community initiatives the organization provides.

In addition to working directly with youth programs, Love Beyond Limits responds to other community needs, such as providing grab-and-go meals to seniors, and through their annual “Give Me a Break” program, which provides 13 families with Christmas gifts, a Christmas tree and a gift certificate for holiday groceries.

According to Chris, the path to growing Love Beyond Limits has not been easy; when she first began the nonprofit, she lacked the educational background and work background to run a nonprofit of this level, she said.

Although it has been a learning process, she has embraced the challenges along the way.

While the pandemic caused numerous nonprofits to have to lay off employees and reduce their services, Chris said she didn't have enough employees to lay off or a whole building that had to close—so she didn't have much to lose.

“So, that kind of gave me a wake-up,

like, maybe it wasn't our time to be a big organization,” said Chris. “Obviously, it gets discouraging . . . but timing is everything, and I believe everything happens at the right time.”

Moving forward, Chris hopes to expand the nonprofit's reach to more areas, and create a community center that can provide even more care to youth in need.

“We just want to keep the families supported and embraced, and sometimes they just need some outside influence to hold them together as opposed to always pulling them apart,” she said.

Chris envisions a center that can serve children, parents, and seniors alike, with sports, cooking classes, exercises for seniors, and even marriage and individual counseling.

“But we have so many wins. We have so many people really supporting us and really cheering for us, and we have so many people willing to use their time or talents or skills to help us help our young people or help our families,” she said.

“Being determined to be a solution, being determined to being available, being determined to help young people and families be accountable,” Chris said, “that has always driven me and kept us going.” ■

# Algalita brings plastic pollution research to classrooms

BY TESS KAZENOFF / Reporter

Nowadays, Algalita, a local marine research organization, is focused largely on bringing plastic education to high schools, but that wasn't always the case.

When Algalita was founded in 1994, it was dedicated 100% to research on kelp restoration. That all changed in 1997, when founder Capt. Charles Moore discovered a build-up of plastics in the Pacific Ocean, and he decided to pivot Algalita's research toward plastic pollution and its harmful effects.

Algalita remained primarily focused on the research aspect—specifically about microplastics in the ocean and macro debris on land—in the years following that pivot, but by 2008, it began slowly shifting toward an educational route, with Katie Allen joining the organization as an education director in 2011.

Soon after beginning her position, Allen found herself receiving calls from teachers everyday requesting learning materials.

Allen, now Algalita's executive director, quickly realized the potential for educational programming in the Long Beach community.

Situated between the LA and San Gabriel Rivers, the city's beaches are a hotspot for plastic pollution, according



Algalita executive director Katie Allen leads a water bike cleanup in 2020. Photo courtesy of Algalita.

to Allen.

“It's really important for young people to have a connection to (nature), but it's really hard to have a connection to it when you go out there, and it's just completely covered by trash and a material that nature was not made to digest,” said Allen.

Allen jumped right in with writing grants, and Algalita began to develop its first teaching kits to distribute to classrooms.

Meanwhile, Algalita's research expanded to focus on nanoplastics (particles that can only be seen with microscopes, and are found in the air and water as well as various products

## Q&A

Continued from cover

there seems to be a long-term executive director that leaves an organization, and then we hear that four or five or six or seven more executive directors leave. That provides a challenge for charities because then they've lost institutional knowledge. And one challenge that all charities—and many for-profit organizations even—have is succession planning. For many of the smaller charities, sharing knowledge and information, having staff to cover all the bases, can be extremely challenging, so that when an individual leaves an organization in a key position, it takes a while for that charity to get back online and fully functioning.

**BR:** Shifting to the holiday season: Why are the holidays such a popular time for giving, and what are some of the best ways people can go about doing it?

**ME:** The holidays really pull the heartstrings of individuals that have means to give because there's an understanding that there are people that don't have as much during a time of giving. While it feels good to be the recipient of a gift, it also feels very good . . . to give that gift. I believe that the spirit of giving is popular during the holidays, because it's a time when people reflect on what's important to them. They reflect on the value of friendship and family. They reflect on the value of making things better around them. We even see people that have very little giving to charity themselves

because they know that someone else has it worse than them.

I would recommend that if an individual knows the charities they want to give to, to contact them and find out what's needed. We saw during the pandemic, a massive surge of donated items and for some of the charities, there was no home for those items. That creates a burden, an additional task on that charity to find a home for those items. Many charities will even publish on their website specific items that they're looking for. So we recommend checking with specific charities before you drop off a donation. And, of course, cash is king and in many cases is the best gift. That way the charity has the flexibility to either purchase what they need or cover their operations.

If an individual doesn't know which charity to contribute to, there are two really great resources on our website: One is if people were to go to longbeachcf.org and click on the donate button, there are about 60 or 70 charitable funds . . . we work closely with that are doing outstanding work in the community. It's a great lead list for somebody looking to shop to make a charitable donation. These are vetted organizations by the Community Foundation. The other resource: We made approximately \$1.3 million worth of donations to about 90 charities that serve Long Beach during the coronavirus pandemic and those are listed on our website . . . with their contact information.

**BR:** What issues are most important during the holiday season, and what are some organizations that focus on those areas?

**ME:** If you were to ask me what the most important issues are in the Long Beach community that an individual can specifically support during the holidays, it would be around two subjects: homelessness . . . and mental health in youth. For people suffering from homelessness, there are several organizations that come to mind. The first is the hub of all activity as it relates to the Health and Human Services Department in conjunction with several other charities in the city that really help people suffering from homelessness, and that is the Multi-Service Center. The charities that come to mind that are not only helping people suffering from homelessness, but also helping people from becoming homeless in the first place—catching them before they fall—are Urban Community Outreach, Long Beach Community Table and Mental Health of America.

For mental health, there's the JCFS—the Jewish Children Family Services, but they go by JCFS because they serve more than just Jewish families. There's also the Guidance Center that works with families and mental health in youth. Those are two of the top organizations that come to mind.

**BR:** Why is mental health in youth so important, especially this time of year?

**ME:** We hear that it is a serious problem all year round, but with the

such as beer).

However, finding funding became increasingly difficult.

“We would do expeditions every four or five years with an idea of monitoring the area for decades, and it's really hard to find many people who will invest in something that doesn't really have that immediate result,” said Allen.

Allen realized that in order for Algalita to continue to thrive, a new need had to be fulfilled: the gap in education specifically surrounding plastic pollution.

“Algalita really tends to dig into the systemic nature of why it's happening and embrace the complexities of the solutions,” said Allen.

Algalita hasn't completely abandoned its research side though; in 2020, a partner organization, Moore Institute for Plastic Pollution Research, was created to focus primarily on nanoplastics research, and its lab can be found right next to Algalita's office and zero-waste store, run in partnership with business owner Julie Darrell, BYO Long Beach.

Moore Institute's research connects directly to the educational component in classrooms, with lessons focusing

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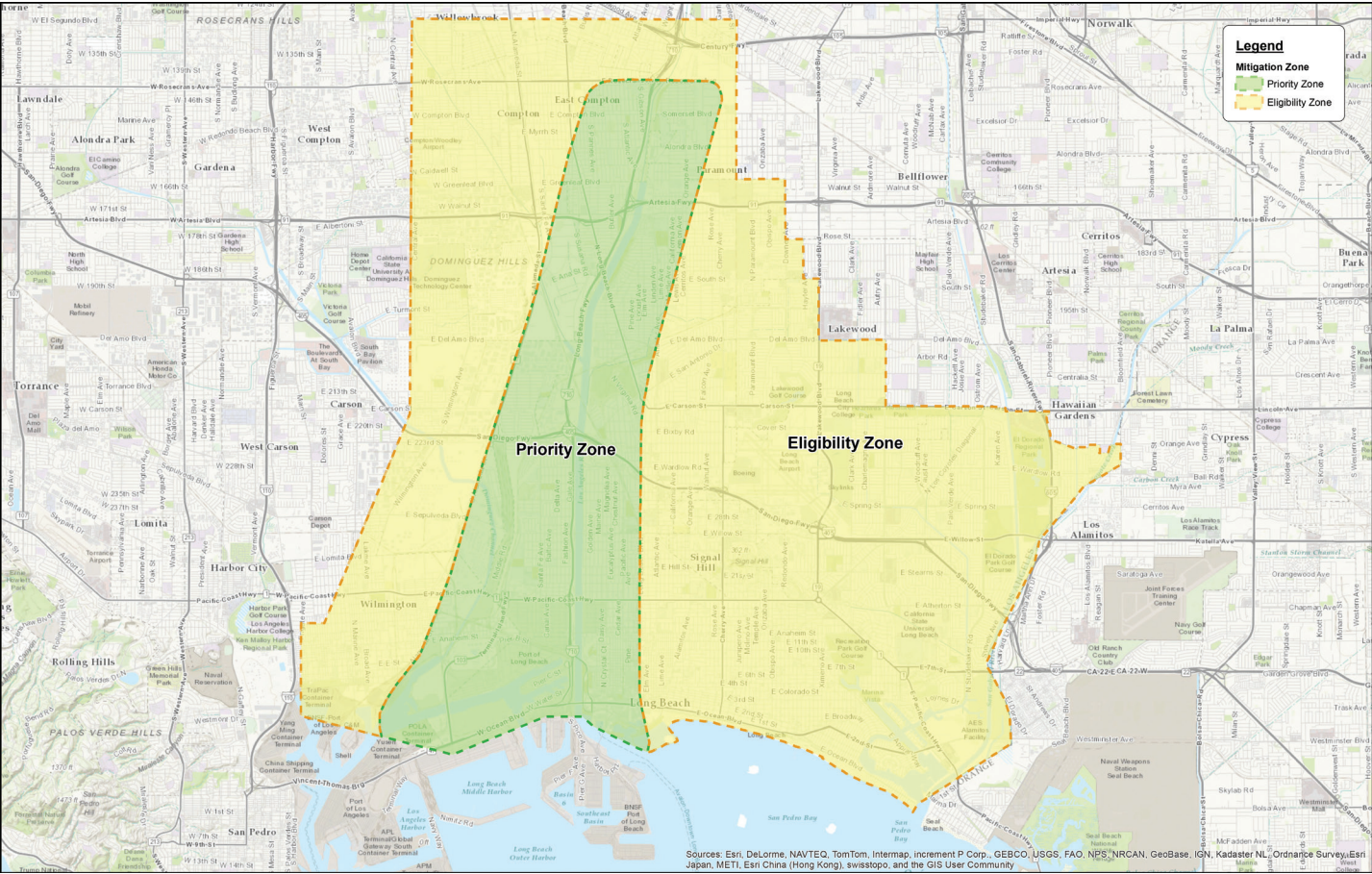


**Deanna Bennett**  
Foundation Service Associate





St. Mary Medical Center provides services to North Long Beach residents paid for through the port's Community Grants Program. Photo courtesy of the Port of Long Beach.



A map of areas eligible for funding through the Port of Long Beach's Community Grants Program. Image courtesy of the Port of Long Beach.

Community Grants

Continued from cover

So the Port of Long Beach has also moved to mitigate local impacts with more immediacy. In 2009, the Port of Long Beach created the Mitigation Grants Program, an initiative to pay for projects to offset the environmental impacts of port operations. The program allowed the port to use funding for major capital improvement projects—such

as the new Long Beach International Bridge and Middle Harbor—to be used for mitigation. “What we recognized is ... while we work on implementing [long-term] programs, we really need to be making beneficial impacts at the same time,” Morgan Caswell, manager of air quality practices at the port, said. “This is another way of trying to reduce our impact within the community by investing in the community that’s being disproportionately impacted.” The voluntary program was well-

received, Caswell said, but feedback indicated the project types—focused just on air quality—were too limited. To expand the program, the port first had to quantifiably demonstrate its impact on neighborhoods across the city. The port underwent a Community Impact Study that showed the impacts on air and water quality, noise and traffic on residents citywide—but especially near the port and along the 710 Freeway, the main artery for carrying goods to and from the port. The analysis was the first of its kind for

any seaport, Caswell said. Following the analysis, the program was updated in 2017 and was renamed the Community Grants Program with an approved \$46 million in funding over the next 12 to 15 years to spend on projects related to water quality, noise pollution and traffic, in addition to the original focus on air quality, Caswell said. The Board of Harbor Commissioners said the program should spend between \$3 million and \$4 million per year. Since 2009, the port has set aside \$65 million and spent or committed over \$33 million between the original and updated program. Port capital improvements projects such as the expansive Pier B On-Dock Rail Support Facility that require an environmental impact report also pay into the Community Grants fund, Caswell said. Since the 2017 update, the port has invested about \$14.8 million into the community, according to its website. Project types vary, ranging from door replacements at Boys & Girls Club facilities throughout the city to updated window and air filtration systems at local schools to creating park and open space. The program also has paid for health education, community outreach and mobile clinics, mostly centered around asthma and other respiratory diseases, which are more prevalent along the 710 corridor than other parts of the city. But some locals say the program doesn’t go far enough. Carlos Ovalle, 63, is a Long Beach resident of 50 years who serves as the vice president of the Riverpark Coalition and regularly offers public comment during Harbor Commission meetings. He said that he appreciates the port’s acknowledgement of its impacts on the surrounding community but said the level of annual investment is insufficient given the port’s overall budget. “I mean, \$3 million to \$4 million sounds like a lot of money—to a person on the street it’s a huge deal,” Ovalle said. “But how much money is brought in by the port every year? And putting that into context given that we’ve had record-breaking trade happening, \$3 million is nothing.” The Board of Harbor Commissioners in May approved the port’s 2022 budget of \$622.4 million. Of that, over half—\$239.1 million—is earmarked for capital improvement projects, including modernizing terminals, rail, bridges, waterways, roads and other infrastructure. The port has plans to invest nearly \$1.6 billion over the next decade in capital improvements meant to enhance productivity and efficiency, while bringing its emissions to zero by 2035. The port, for its part, said the dollar amount for the grants program was determined through a Mitigation Monetization Study as part of its Community Impact Study. Heather Tomley, director of planning and environmental affairs

at the port, said the study used “well-established metrics to quantify the port’s proportional contribution to community impacts.” “Using those metrics, the monetization study applied cost factors to establish a funding level for mitigation strategies that is consistent with California State Lands Commission,” Tomley added. “The [study] was commended for its technical merit by the [commission].” Community Grants have ranged from as little as \$2,200 to over \$825,000. “We have a range and that was intentional as part of the program,” Caswell said. “We want small, medium and large organizations to apply. We’re trying to be as inclusive of a program as possible.” The port’s overall budget also includes its 611 employees and pays into the city’s Tidelands Operating Fund that pays for projects and maintenance along the city’s coast. Those projects, however, do not benefit residents who live along the 710 corridor, which Ovalle and other residents have come to call the “diesel death corridor” due to the high volume of semi-trucks moving in and out of the port spewing emissions. Research backs up those residents’ concerns. On a range from 0-20, with 20 being the greatest impact, the average Environmental Justice Screening Method score for neighborhoods along the 710 is 15, compared to the county average of 11, according to the Neighborhood Data for Social Change, a project of the USC Price Center for Social Innovation. The score means the cumulative impact of air pollution for the 20 neighborhoods along the freeway is greater than 80% of all other neighborhoods countywide. Neighborhoods along the 710 average 36% more particulate matter concentrations than the county average, according to CalEnviroScreen 3.0. Even at moderate levels, particulate matter negatively affects the short- and long-term health of people, especially children, seniors and those with respiratory illnesses. Studies show that people living in high-emissions zones are more likely to develop asthma, heart disease and lung cancer. Ovalle, who grew up along the 710 and still lives adjacent to the corridor, said he has watched as countless people in his family and community developed cancer and respiratory diseases, which he attributes to air pollution in the area. “We’ve discussed it with our respective oncologists and they’ve determined that none of the cancers are related,” Ovalle said. “The only thing

they can point to is the environment.” Residents living along the 710—over 70% of whom are Latino or Black—average 62 asthma-related visits to emergency rooms per 10,000 people, while county neighborhoods that are more than 70% White average 30, according to 2017 data from CalEnviroScreen 3.0. Again noting the increased cargo volumes that have worked their way through the port since the onset of the pandemic, Ovalle said the increased truck traffic will only worsen air quality. “We are essentially subsidizing with our health the profits of the shipping industry and mega-shippers like Walmart and Amazon,” Ovalle said. “[The port plans] to do all these things ... in the future and I just don’t see that we have that time. In 10-15 years, it’s going to be too late for a lot of people.” The port, officials said, is doing what it can—with the help of those impacted. Deciding on which projects to fund is based on community outreach, Caswell said. Each year, the port hosts workshops to hear from residents and the project types they would like to see funded. Historically, the community advocates for health programs and air filtration, Caswell said, but recently parks and open space have become more popular. Virtual workshops for input on 2022 projects were held Dec. 8 and 9. The port also released an online survey for input to inform funding priorities through 2024. The survey, which is open until Dec. 23, can be found at [survey.monkey.com/r/PKXWM72](https://survey.monkey.com/r/PKXWM72). Ovalle attended the Dec. 8 meeting, where he advocated for increased park and open space in the highest-impacted communities, particularly the Westside and North Long Beach along the 710 Freeway. Ovalle noted that those areas of the city have substantially less park acreage than East Long Beach, which does not suffer the same level of impact from port operations. While the main focus on the program is Long Beach, the impacts of port operations do not adhere to city limits, Caswell said. Signal Hill along with portions of Carson, Compton, Dominguez Hills, Paramount and Wilmington also fall into the eligibility zone of the program and funding has been allocated to projects in those areas, Caswell said. Areas outside Long Beach were not eligible for funding until the 2017 update, Caswell added. “A focus of the program right now is to increase that outreach,” Caswell said, “and make sure folks unfamiliar have resources and information they need so they can also access the dollars.” ■

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Two-year-old Violet Law began a 104-week trial of an oral medication meant to reduce the progression and symptoms of GM1 gangliosidosis. Photo courtesy of David Law.



David Law and his 2-year-old daughter, Violet, who was diagnosed with GM1 gangliosidosis in May. She was recently accepted into a clinical trial and began the treatment in November. Photo courtesy of David Law.

# Foundation gives 2-year-old with fatal disease a second chance

BY TESS KAZENOFF / Reporter

In May, when David Law and Veena Sison-Law received the news that their daughter Violet had a fatal and rare disease, GM1 gangliosidosis, they sprang into action.

GM1 gangliosidosis is an aggressive disease in which the body does not produce adequate enzymes to break down certain molecules. These molecules instead collect on the brain and spinal cord, resulting in widespread neurological degeneration that leads to an inability to walk, eat or speak.

“I think I was in shock,” said Law. “It was easy for us to become scientific and talk about some of the physiology and all that, but looking back on all that now, it’s hard to even remember what I said, who I was talking to.”

Both physicians, the couple knew there were limited options available for them to explore beyond the limited existing clinical trials.

They started a GoFundMe, with the goal of reaching \$25,000 to help fund medical research.

Instead, the GoFundMe skyrocketed, and by June 11, Violet’s second birthday, the fundraiser had reached over \$87,000.

The couple celebrated her “very bittersweet second birthday party” in the park, with Violet dressed in a Minnie Mouse costume, and surrounded by friends and family.

After the surprising success of the GoFundMe, the Laws tried to adapt to their new sense of normalcy.

“After the shock wore off, there was still a lot of pain and anger and sadness,” said Law.

There were three genetic clinical trials available at the time, but Violet’s condition had progressed too far along for her to qualify.

“It was heartbreaking, because we’d put so much into this, and none of them came through,” said Law.

The parents slowly watched Violet lose more and more of her developmental milestones. She is not able to speak, walk or crawl, and she even lost head control motions. She is also having some difficulty swallowing and now has a feeding tube from her nose to her stomach.

But then came what Law considers a miracle.

Due to advocacy and fundraising, the Cure GM1 Foundation successfully lobbied for a clinical trial at UCLA to open up slots for those with GM1 gangliosidosis as a secondary population.

The trial initially was only recruiting for its primary population, adults with Tay-Sachs disease, also known as GM2 gangliosidosis, that functions very similarly to GM1.

Both GM1 and GM2 gangliosidosis occur in the same ganglioside pathway, and affect the nervous system, said Dr. Susan Perlman, the neurologist leading the trial. The progression and symptoms that are involved are very similar for both diseases.

“It’s important that any drug company includes a secondary population,” said

Perlman. “A group that could benefit from the drug might not meet criteria to get into the primary population, but deserve, ethically, to have a trial of the drug under careful monitoring.”

According to Perlman, a common dividing point in most drug trials aimed at the nervous system is ambulatory versus non-ambulatory.

“It’s similar to compassionate availability or expanded access, except it’s being done under the umbrella of a carefully monitored clinical trial, so that safety can be more closely monitored,” said Perlman.

The secondary population can also provide usable information that ultimately expands the drug’s usefulness upon FDA approval, she said.

On Sept. 3, the family applied, without having any expectation of success.

After at first being put on the waiting list, the couple finally got the news in October that they were able to move forward with participation in the Phase 3 trial, which will test 70 to 80 participants across two populations.

“That was such a miracle, because we didn’t have to fly to Boston or New York or San Francisco or any other site,” said Law. “We live in Santa Monica, so we literally drove down the street to UCLA.”

Throughout the month, Violet received baseline testing, blood tests, and interviews, and in November underwent an electrocardiogram test and a spinal tap.

On Nov. 10, Violet received her first dose of the oral medication, venglustat,

that will be taken for 104 weeks and is meant to reduce the build-up of gangliosides, hopefully slowing down the progression of the disease as well as improving the symptoms.

“Coming through all of that now, for the first time, we have hope, we actually have a treatment in a clinical trial with an unproven drug (that has) some very promising science behind it,” said Law. “This is essentially her new birthday, November 10th.”

According to Perlman, the brain is far more resilient than many people generally assume, and there is the possibility of regaining motor and developmental milestones.

“There’s concern that the child who has this illness will be permanently damaged, unable to grow in any meaningful way, while behind the scenes, we know that the brain is very responsive,” said Perlman. “I think this class of drugs should improve hope, not just amongst patients and their families, but amongst healthcare providers, that these will not ultimately be hopeless diseases.”

Perlman also stressed the importance of patients and families of those with rare diseases to connect with one another and give each other support.

“As a parent of one of these children, you are not alone,” she said.

For the Laws, connecting with other families through the Cure GM1 Foundation was crucial, and Law also went through emotional coaching through Educational Awareness Center to cope with the anxiety and stress of the situation.

“I’ve been working on shifting my interpretation of this whole thing from being a hopeless curse to it now being an opportunity to really take care of a special child and to be more positive and optimistic and focus on it,” said Law. “You can’t be completely present and you can’t be the most effective parent out there unless you’re taking care of yourself as a person.”

Law urged parents in a similar situation to not give up on exploring every possible avenue because, as impossible as it may seem, all it takes is for one opportunity to open up, he said.

“Of course, we want the best for Violet,” Law said, “but if nothing else, it helps add to the knowledge base and the trials for this disease and these therapeutics that maybe in the future can provide a permanent, completely efficacious solution for kids with her disorder.”

And in the meantime, the family is making a point to enjoy every moment possible with their daughter, going on regular outings and even small trips together.

For the Laws, it is all about the little moments, such as when she looks up at her parents when they say her name, or the occasional giggle, often when watching cartoons, that “truly is a gift for us,” said Law.

“We are really committed to giving her the full life experience no matter what may come, and not holding back for any of these things,” Law said, “just because she deserves it.” ■



Teachers participate in a synthetic sand training workshop. Photo courtesy of Algalita.

## Algalita

Continued from page 9

largely on what plastics, particularly nanoplastic pollution, could potentially mean for human health, said Allen.

“With every new wave of students that comes in, it’s just like a new generation of people to educate, it’s incredible. The need is always there and it just seems to continue to grow every single year,” she said.

In total, Algalita’s academic programs have engaged over 2,150 teachers and 275,800 students through in-class science workshops, teacher training and field research opportunities.

In some instances, young students are even given the opportunity to interact with scientists and use equipment normally only available at a university level.

While classrooms have been largely located within Southern California, Algalita has given virtual presentations to classes across the United States,



Algalita allows students and teachers to engage in research to study plastic pollution and its impacts on human health. Photo courtesy of Algalita.

and has even brought students together from all over the world to work on plastic pollution projects within their communities, through the International Youth Summit event. Algalita’s leadership programs have helped launch over 146 waste reduction campaigns in schools spanning 24 countries.

The last International Youth Summit was in February 2020, and Allen is not sure when the event will return, due to the pandemic.

To continue expanding Algalita’s

reach, this year the organization is working to create a more robust series of teaching kits that can aid classroom learning, said Allen.

Considering how Algalita’s educational program is “very experiential,” said Allen, with such a huge focus on working directly in classrooms and with teachers, the pandemic required a rethinking and reinvention of how to continue.

One way Allen hopes to revamp the curriculum is to introduce more of the policy side to students, so they can understand how solutions work and how science supports policy, along with the relationship between scientists and policymakers, she said.

More of an emphasis will be placed on Algalita’s online programming, The Wayfinder Society, and Allen hopes to build it out more this year with a larger focus on how teachers can better utilize it.

Along with coping with the shift to virtual programming, though, the pandemic also brought on a new problem for Algalita: a return to heavy plastic use.

Prior to the pandemic, “the movement was peaking,” said Allen.

“In 2020, it seemed like plastic pollution was not at the forefront of people’s minds anymore—and of course, it wouldn’t be. We have this pandemic, and it’s scary and people are essentially just trying to survive,” she said. “It was really a challenging time for people who have worked so long and so hard to get the idea of reuse at the forefront of businesses’ and individuals’ minds.”

While Allen has observed that the movement has started to pick up momentum again within the past six months or so, it is still a slow uphill battle.

But in the meantime, Algalita will continue looking for innovative ways to connect students and teachers to the movement, especially as nanoplastics research continues advancing.

“We’re really excited to break open the education space ... and start getting (students) excited about learning about the complexities and also being forward thinking,” said Allen. “The science is still so new, so it’s going to be really interesting to kind of do a deep dive and see how we can start creating education programs around that.” ■



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# Marina Shores to be redeveloped with multifamily housing

BY BRANDON RICHARDSON / Reporter

The Marina Shores retail center in Southeast Long Beach sold for \$67.9 million to Vancouver-based developer Onni Group, which has plans to redevelop the site with multifamily housing, the commercial real estate firm Newmark announced earlier this month.

The 6.17-acre site is currently occupied by several businesses, including Petco, Chronic Tacos, Orangetheory Fitness and Five Guys, among others. The site also includes a shuttered Mimi’s Cafe and large vacant storefront that was previously occupied by Whole Foods before it moved into a large space up the street at the new 2ND & PCH retail center.

Newmark’s Kevin Shannon, Bill Bauman, Ken White, Chris Benton and Anthony Muhlstein represented Onni as well as the seller, Regency Centers.

“Marina Shores received tremendous interest with over 15 offers,” Benton said in the Dec. 2 announcement. “The demand was driven by the property’s new specific plan conducive for multifamily



The Marina Shores retail center, Tuesday, Nov. 23, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

development, its highly amenitized micro location and ... the high rent growth in the submarket.”

Onni did not respond to multiple requests for comment regarding details for the future project or when current tenants will be vacating the shopping center for demolition.

Long Beach’s Southeast Area Specific

Plan was originally approved by the City Council in September 2017 after a two-year outreach and planning effort. The plan outlines development guidelines for the area, including land-use designation, building heights and more.

Amid a statewide housing shortage, the SEASP plan identified multiple parcels—including Marina Shores—as

potential sites for future residential or mixed-use development with up to 2,500 units. Other parcels include what is now 2ND & PCH and the expansive Marketplace retail center.

Located in the coastal zone, SEASP required California Coastal Commission approval, which it received in September of this year after some modifications.

As outlined in the plan, the future development can be a maximum of five stories.

Onni is not new to the Long Beach market, with its massive Broadway Block development currently underway. Located on the northeast corner of Broadway and Long Beach Boulevard in Downtown, the project includes a 23-story tower and a seven-story midrise building with a combined 432 units.

“Developers are excited to work with cities that recognize the immense housing shortage and want to make a positive contribution,” Muhlstein said. “The size, demand and waterfront location complemented by walkable first-class amenities make this a unique development opportunity.” ■



Top to bottom: This horse-friendly ranch-style home in North Long Beach, complete with equine facilities, is offered by Realtor Jesse Colon at \$1.477 million. Listing photo.

The Western-style front porch at 6995 N. Atlantic Place, listed at nearly \$1.5 million. Listing photo.

Horses in their stables at the North Long Beach home. Listing photo.

The beach at Long Beach crowded with dozens of unhitched horses and carriages as their owners sunbathe and frolic on the beach. The Long Beach pier juts out into the water in the background. Photo courtesy California Historical Society.

# An equestrian estate in North Long Beach is listed at \$1.5 million

BY TIM GROBATY / Columnist

Long Beach doesn’t typically have a strong reputation as being horse country. Aquatics? Rap musicians? Diverse restaurants? Yes to all that, but neigh to horses.

It wasn’t always that way, obviously, because before cars, there were horses everywhere in Long Beach. In people’s yards, on the beach, tied up in front of saloons, stored in stables Downtown.

There were blacksmiths shoeing horses in those days; feed stores selling hay and oats, saddle makers, wagon dealers.

The opening of a new stable in the early 1900s, when there were few ways to find amusement in town, was cause for a celebration. When George Humphreys moved his Star Livery Stable from 125 E. First St. to more spacious digs at Second Street and American Avenue in 1905, he threw a “watermelon social” in which fellas were required to bring their girlfriend and a watermelon. Then everyone eats watermelon.

In slightly more modern times (late 1950s modern), I even recall the odd horseback rider cantering up Atlantic Avenue in Bixby Knolls, or trotting through my neighborhood on Keever Avenue in Bixby Terrace. It wasn’t weird, but it was rare enough that people would at least say, “Look. A horse.”

Now you’ve gotta go looking around if you want to see a horse in Long Beach. And the place to look would be way up in North Long Beach and even into Compton (home of the Compton Cowboys), where horses are still OK and if you venture up north along the LA Riverbed, you can still see some urban equine action.

And, if you have about a million and a half dollars and a true fondness for ponies, I’ve got just the place for you today.

Listed by Realtor Jesse Colon of Colon Realty at a bit under \$1.5 million, the horse house isn’t so much a house as a hacienda. If we can put aside the house

itself for a moment and stick to horses, this nearly half-acre property has 10 large horse stables, six of which have been redone and modernized, a huge storage shed with a bathroom and room for food storage, and an arena for working out your horses (that is, if you plan on having horses, which would be the assumption, though Colon said he’s had a cash offer from some monks who want to use the property as a place to congregate and pray). The spread is so big you can see it from outer space—or at least from a high-flying drone.

The house and stables are at 6995 N. Atlantic Place, a road that splits off from Atlantic Avenue at about 69th Street and goes straight north while the avenue veers off to the west, crosses the river and winds its way up to the city of Paramount, never to be seen again.

The main house is spacious and appropriately Western Rustic. A handsome new gated entry leads to a large and new driveway. There’s a companionable front porch with wagon-wheel benches and the house has a new Presidential Series roof.

Much of the home has been renovated with remodeled bathrooms and new electric including an upgraded 200 amp panel. There’s a new upgraded kitchen with quartz counters and cabinets, new hardwood flooring and block walls. Windows? They’ve been upgraded, too.

There are other equestrian properties on the west side of Atlantic Place. If you’re intent on spending upward of a million dollars for a house in North Long Beach, this is where you’ll manage to do it easiest. The homes on the east side of the street are your more traditional Northtown homes, mostly valued close to the \$626,000 median home price in the 90805 ZIP code.

So, the horse house is a rare NLB million-dollar property, but it’s certainly not for everyone—not even for every millionaire. But if you enjoy living in what feels like rural America you might enjoy this place, as long as you like horses. You’ve gotta like horses. ■

## CITY OF LONG BEACH BID OPPORTUNITIES

TITLE	BID NUMBER	DUE DATE
Apparel with Embroidery and Screen-Print	ITB LB21-099	12/16/2021
Autocar Xpeditor Highway Line	ITB FS 22-006	12/16/2021
Striper Truck, CNG		
Street Repair Services	WD-08-22	12/16/2021
Request for Quotation Propane Gas	RFQ	12/17/2021
Special Event Equipment Rental	RFP PR22-008	12/21/2021
Street Lighting Equipment	ITB PW21-087	12/21/2021
Filter #3 Inspection, Repair &	RFP	12/21/2021
Media Replacement Professional Services		
RFP - Well Asset Management Project	WR-2101	12/22/2021
Alamitos Tanks 19 & 20 Conversion Project	WD-21-21	01/06/2022
(REO-0208)		
Safe Parking Program	RFP HE21-104	01/13/2022
Fire Department Headquarters Generator	3005010082	01/18/2022
Marine Navigation and Communication	ITB PD21-098	02/01/2022

**Bidder Registration**  
To receive notifications of bid opportunities, register with the City of Long Beach at [www.longbeach.gov/finance/business-info/purchasing-division/purchasing-division/](http://www.longbeach.gov/finance/business-info/purchasing-division/purchasing-division/) Additional details on upcoming bids and how to register can be found on the website.

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Dec. 7 & 14, 2021  
Registration & Viewing Hours:  
8:00 A.M. – 9:50 A.M.

## Partake Collective in East Village will offer needed space for up-and-coming chefs

BY MATT MILLER / Reporter

Ladies and gentlemen of the culinary world, Long Beach gourmands, foodies, and Top Chef wannabes everywhere, may I present: The Partake Collective.

A first of its kind, Partake comprises 25,000 square feet of old building converted into nine individual kitchens ranging from 370 to 750 square feet. Ten prep kitchens. A 1,200-square-foot communal kitchen with five fully equipped rentable cooking suites available in eight-hour shifts (four with traditional cooking equipment and one suite with large production equipment for catering). Two communal walk-in refrigerators, a walk-in freezer, dry storage and an equipment-washing station.

And if that isn’t enough, there’s an accelerator program available to the Partake culinary community offering capital, tools and the training required for a small brand to grow, as well as tenant support staff offering expert guidance on insurance, design, branding and more.

Located at 456 Elm Ave. in the East Village Arts District, it is housed in a building that has served many purposes including a Pacific Bell telephone call switchboard, back when landlines were a thing, and more recently a mental health facility.

I was fortunate that Partake CEO Adam Carrillo was willing to show me around the 25,000-square-foot site

that is slated to open in the spring of 2022 but is currently still in the rough construction phase.

Hard hats on our heads, and wrapped in neon safety vests, we walked through a banging and buzzing construction sight where Carrillo explained that the building is going to be restored to its former glory. “The primary entrance will be on Fifth Street, the secondary entrance will be on Elm,” he told me, pointing to the two doorways leading into a sun-filled lobby embracing exposed brick and original 4×6 wooden beams.

“Right here you’ll have a beautiful jewel box where people can go in and grab their food out of the lockers,” he said as he presented a floor space busy with construction workers allowing for the if-you-build-it-they-will-come moment. And his vision is easy to see.

Simply order through a kiosk in the lobby, or on your mobile device, or through any number of third-party platforms. Utilize contactless pickup or delivery, or simply dine in—yes, there’s a dining room where you and all your friends can go out to dinner and order from completely different restaurants. Imagine that: You won’t have to worry about the one friend (there’s always one) who’s paleo, keto, vegan, gluten-free, low-carb, sugar-free or just really picky. With more than 20 different kitchen spaces spanning three floors, odds are there’s going to be something for everyone. And

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Roland Sands, left, Andy Bell and Erik Bond inside the joint headquarters of Roland Sands Design and Sweatpants Media in the Zaferia neighborhood Friday, Dec. 3, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

# ‘Nitro Circus’ star, ex-motorcycle racer team up to open creative business campus in Zaferia

BY BRANDON RICHARDSON / Reporter

A gearhead and an adrenaline junkie meet at a trade show. There is no punchline. Andy Bell and Roland Sands hit it off immediately nearly 20 years ago and have been friends ever since. The two went on to create separate businesses—Roland Sands Design and Sweatpants Media—and, after years

of operating out of their respective headquarters, have come together to create a joint home base in Long Beach’s Zaferia neighborhood. The companies together purchased a multi-building property at 1365 Obispo Ave. with a vision for a creative campus. Along with their firms, the graphics company Spin Imaging and Moxi Roller Skates also will call the campus home

in a building separate from Sands’ and Bell’s space. “We just wanted like-minded but different companies here to fuel a vibe of people that are stoked and doing rad stuff,” Bell said. “People we can hang out with,” Sands added. “Fabrication, 3D fabrication, film, photography, graphics, printing—it’s all here. Almost any project is possible here,

and that’s a pretty special thing.” The friends almost missed out on the space, Sands said. The building was listed in 2018, but he was not in a position to take on the project by himself—and Bell was not ready to jump into such a massive undertaking. But when another buyer went into escrow on the site, the pair said they instantly knew they made a mistake. “This place was built in the ‘40s, and it’s gorgeous,” Sands said. After months in escrow, the deal fell through, and Bell and Sands pounced. They bought the property for about \$3 million in July 2019. The tenant had a few months left on their lease, so the roughly \$2.5 million buildout did not get underway until just before the pandemic, which slowed progress on the rehab. But after nearly two years, the companies celebrated their grand opening earlier this month.

The space features a retail store (open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.), a screening theater, 3D and other fabrication facilities, a wood-working space, a motorcycle garage, design rooms and a slew of offices. It also includes a bar, a two-chair barbershop for special events for clients that could also be utilized by a tattoo artist, and dozens of motorcycles and helmets on display. A third building is currently set up as a jam space for musician friends of Bell and Sands. The room has a stage and is full of vintage and modern musical equipment. The two said they have toyed with the idea of turning it into a legitimate music venue, but that won’t happen until well into the future, if at all. Bell and Sands each had a career riding motorcycles—the latter racing on the roads of the U.S., the former flying through the air in freestyle motocross—before they met each other in the early 2000s at a motorcycle trade show in Indianapolis. Sands, a Long Beach native, grew up around motorcycles.

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Robb Smith, owner of Alley Cat Deliveries, unloads bags of cereal boxes to AIDS Food Store as part of its annual cereal drive Friday, Dec. 3, 2021. Photo by Cheantay Jensen.

# One-man courier service goes above and beyond for customers and community

BY CHEANTAY JENSEN / Reporter

It was the moment when Robb Smith pulled out a small, jingling set of keys and unlocked the yet-unopened doors to the Long Beach Creamery in Bixby Knolls that I got a sense for just how unorthodox Smith’s delivery service, Alley Cat Deliveries, really is. “I’ve got the keys to all their stores,” Smith said, matter-of-factly. “They trust me.”

# Long Beach will make it harder, more expensive to evict tenants to remodel units

BY JASON RUIZ / Reporter

The Long Beach City Council voted last week to start drafting an ordinance that will add more protections for tenants when a landlord wants to remodel a unit. The ordinance, however, will not include a proposed plan for a city-run program that would eliminate these types of evictions and see the city monitor rental unit remodeling work. The council instituted a moratorium on “substantial remodel” evictions earlier this year as the city worked to come up with a long-term solution that would balance landlords’ ability to remodel their properties and the rights of the people living inside of them. A substantial remodel is any renovation that requires work permits to be pulled and would take more than 30 days to complete. The council voted unanimously on Dec. 7 for the city attorney to start drafting the new ordinance. Councilwoman Cindy Allen, one of the members who requested the moratorium in July, called for a hybrid approach to the options that were presented to the council. Allen said that while she supported creating a program similar to Los Angeles, which would involve city staff monitoring remodeling projects throughout the city, it was not feasible given the city’s current financial situation. Instead, Allen asked for the city to start tracking evictions caused by landlords remodeling units, increasing the relocation assistance given to tenants to \$4,500 or two months rent, whichever is more, and to require a 90-day notice for tenants being displaced due to



Maribel Miréles, a Long Beach tenant, holds a sign during a rally at City Hall in Downtown Long Beach on Saturday, March 27, 2021. Photo by Sebastian Echeverry.

remodeling. State law requires just one month’s rent to be paid to tenants. It would also establish a civil penalty of up to \$15,000 for landlords who violate the substantial remodel guidelines established by state law. “These are things that we can do today, at lower costs to the city and to landlords,” Allen said. The current moratorium on evictions tied to remodels was also extended until the new ordinance is adopted by the City Council. The council will be presented with a year’s worth of remodel-related evictions once the ordinance goes into effect, along with possible funding sources if the council wishes to implement a new monitoring program in the future. An attempt by Councilwoman

Walking through the dim, empty ice cream shop, he spots the two dozen packaged brownies, butter cakes and chocolate chip cookies he’s been tasked to pick up and deliver to the ice cream shop’s Downtown location. He stacks them into a large blue freezer bag in the backseat of his Jeep Renegade, zips up, and locks the door to the creamery before he’s back in his car, heading south down Atlantic Avenue, fingers tapping the steering wheel. Runs like these, where he transports in-store product between stores or picks up ingredients for local businesses (which he’d also been asked to do that afternoon), have been a lifesaver for his delivery service these days, he said, since he’s getting fewer calls for food and grocery deliveries now that people are opting to dine out and grocery shop for themselves again. Those deliveries during the peaks of the pandemic, when people were stuck at home, “really put us on the map,” he said. “I always just pivot, pivot, pivot,” Smith said. “Like right now, we’re doing airport rides.” To be sure, it’s a lot more than rides to the airport and grocery shopping. In the three years since launching Alley Cat Deliveries, Smith has earned a sparkling local reputation as a go-to delivery guy.

His Yelp rating is a pristine five stars, teeming with rave reviews that reveal just how personal his service can get. He’s helped people move apartments, pick up their pets from doggy day care, mail their packages, hand off court documents, deliver their cannabis. He did a sex shop run once for a client but said he won’t be doing that again—it’s too much information. “I have a hard time saying no,” Smith said. “Like tomorrow, I have to get three bales of hay, which I do not like to do because I’ve done it and it gets all over my car...but what’s a vacuum, you know?” Smith said he’s also exploring small freight and cargo transportation. “I know that we have a huge need for it in the ports,” he said, “I’m looking into the future.” Not too long ago, the immediate future was all Smith could focus on. Shortly after moving to Long Beach from Redondo Beach after a rough divorce, Smith lost his apartment on Fifth Street and Chestnut Avenue. With no money to fork up the costs for a new place, he and his two kids, who are 7 and 9 now, were couch surfing for almost a year. Meanwhile, Smith tried to make ends meet delivering for Postmates. “I’d have to work almost 10 hours a

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The former site of a Best Buy will now be an LA Fitness gym in the Marina Pacifica shopping center in Long Beach Thursday, Dec. 2, 2021. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

# LA Fitness to take over former Best Buy site at Marina Pacifica retail center

BY BRANDON RICHARDSON / Reporter

LA Fitness is taking over the former Best Buy location at the Marina Pacifica retail center, which has sat vacant for over three years. The fitness giant, with around 470 locations nationwide, is expected to open its doors in Southeast Long Beach during the third quarter of 2022, according to Senior Vice President and Chief Real Estate Officer William Horner. “Convenience is one of the most important components of staying on a fitness program,” Horner said in an email. “Because of the road system and waterways, movement to and among the different communities in this area can be challenging, but most residents

of those ... communities traverse this intersection on a regular basis.” The new 33,3690-square-foot facility will feature a host of amenities and activities on a single level, according to Horner, including, aerobics, cycling, cardio, circuit training, free weights, physical training, Kids Klub and locker rooms with showers and saunas. The storefront has been vacant since Best Buy abandoned the space in October 2018, though the company announced the closure several months earlier. In mid-July 2019, city staff confirmed Marina Pacifica property owner Avi Lerner was in negotiations with a national gym chain, but the company was not disclosed. ■









Artist's rendering of the exterior of Partake Collective, coming to Elm Avenue in the East Village in the spring. Rendering courtesy of Studio One Eleven.

Partake Collective

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while you're waiting for your food, you'll be able to browse the retail market featuring brands and selections of products from the Partake tenants.

Partake is a way for a cottage food business (items produced at home for farmers markets) to become an actual product on grocery store shelves. Or for a pop-up to get that first step toward becoming an actual restaurant. It's the

helping hand every small business needs when it's ready to grow.

It's filling a need: While it's easy for anyone to get a cottage permit for a couple hundred bucks to make goods at home to sell at a farmers market, you're limited by \$50,000 in gross sales. If you're successful enough to exceed that amount, then you have to move into a commercially permitted space, which means hiring a commercial architect, which means hiring a commercial construction crew, which means going through commercial plan-check,

inspections, fees, and waiting, waiting, waiting for the city to allow you to open while paying commercial rent.

But if you make \$50,000 a year in gross sales, that means, optimistically, you're putting \$20,000 a year in your pocket, with which to pay your rent, gas for your car, food, utilities, insurance—and in the end you're barely making enough money to survive. Your commercial buildout expense can be over \$100,000, which is a lot of money for a bank to give to a person who only makes \$20,000 a year baking cookies at home for a farmers market.

What Partake is offering is more than a "ghost kitchen" opportunity; Partake is filling the void between being in your kitchen at home, and having to find \$100,000.

Carrillo's background is in economic development, so he has partnered with Chef Josh Drew, founder of Greenwood Advisory, who has worked with the likes of Thomas Keller (The French Laundry), Jeff Cerciello (Farm Shop), Michael Tusk (Quince), & Marc Vetri (Verti Cucina), as well as consulted for The Tartine Group to handle the culinary details, and to be sure each cooking space is top-notch.

Are you a chef for hire, or a passionate cook who loves to share what you're making on your Instagram feed? Ever thought about offering an in-person cooking class or demonstration? Or

maybe you just want to play restaurant for a day with a prix fixe menu? Well, say no more. There will be a 700-square-foot, state-of-the-art show kitchen in full view available for anyone who wants to rent it (starting at \$800 a day, or by the week), complete with chef's counter seating for up to six and a private dining area for that perfect "chef-driven experience."

In addition to all that, there will be a community classroom on the lower level available where anyone with something to teach can teach a class. It's a space for lectures, workshops or technical classes like sanitation certifications.

"I worked with Cal State Long Beach to launch the entrepreneurship education classes in Downtown," Carrillo told me. "I think those partnerships were driven by community members that had a special need, and they were able to share their real-life experience helping budding entrepreneurs learn more about owning, operating and opening a business."

This goes back to how Carrillo views Partake as a whole: seeing 456 Elm as more than kitchens, more than a dining experience, but first and foremost as an "ecosystem for entrepreneurship" where a business owner can expand and flourish.

"There are so many positive programs and opportunities [that will be] going on this building—I mean, it's not just one discussion, it's an ongoing expansion." Or, one might call it a culinary collective, "that we want you to Partake in." ■

Belmont Shore parklets expected to phase out amid low demand for permanent structures

BY JASON RUIZ / Reporter

Parking in Belmont Shore is expected to improve over the next several months as temporary dining parklets are taken down ahead of the end of the city program that allowed businesses to extend their footprints into streets and parking lots to help them endure during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are about 56 parking spaces currently being used by temporary parklets, or about 11% of all metered spaces on or adjacent to Second Street, but that figure is expected to decline dramatically, according to city traffic engineer Carl Hickman.

Hickman said that of the 30 businesses currently using parklets along the Second Street corridor, just 10 have inquired about converting them into permanent additions to their business. Another 10 businesses have said they want to keep their temporary structures through the end of the city's Open Streets program.

"We are in the process of removing them when business owners no longer need them or ask for them to be removed," Hickman said.

If all 10 of those businesses end up being permitted and pay the tens of thousands of dollars to build a more permanent parklet, it would mean just 20 spaces would be off limits to parking.

That would represent 4% of the available metered parking. Hickman said that the goal is to allocate no more than 7% of parking stalls for parklets on Second Street, which amounts to about 36 spaces or 18 two-stall parklets.

Businesses have until Jan. 31 to indicate if they want to build a permanent parklet, Hickman said. Eight parklets on Second Street have been removed to date.

Not all temporary parklets are eligible to become permanent ones for a variety of reasons, including their placement near drainage elements, conflicts with utility lines and the width of the street left over after the parklet is installed.

Hickman said the standard is for 12 feet to be available for vehicle traffic, though some exemptions have been made for temporary structures.

Public Works officials made clear earlier this month that any permanent structure would likely look much



Rakkan Ramen employee Thomas Burk sets up the parklet the business shares with Legends sports bar in Belmont Shore, Thursday, Dec. 9, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

different than the temporary ones that can be found across the city.

"None of the temporary parklets anywhere in the city would qualify as a permanent one," said Public Works Deputy Director Diko Melkonian.

The city has a handbook of more than 50 pages on the design guidelines for permanent parklets, which covers the kinds of materials they can be made of, features that must be met to ensure the safety of patrons and the kind of insurance that businesses need to carry to cover the parklets.

The issue of parklets has been a point of concern for residents of the neighborhoods near Second Street with noise, parking impacts, the aesthetics of the parklets, and other quality-of-life issues being cited over the past few months. The concerns followed early praise for the parklets on Second Street in late 2020.

The city held a public meeting and circulated a survey to area residents, business owners and customers and found that about half of the respondents supported the program, but lingering concerns could lead to a tailored approach to address problematic parklets in the area.

One of the changes will be to parklets on side streets that branch off of Second Street and are closer to homes. Those parklets will no longer be allowed if they have multiple documented violations of the rules in place for parklet operators.

Other areas of the city, like Pine Avenue and the Atlantic Corridor in Bixby Knolls, previously had outdoor dining parklets but opted to fully reopen those streets earlier this year. ■

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Craig Danley, shareholder-CEO, Delta Pipeline Inc.

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Alley Cat

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day to make 100 bucks,” he recalled.

The hours were especially grueling because he’d do it all on his BMX bike—rain or shine.

Exhausted, exasperated and occasionally rain-soaked, he wondered if it would be possible to branch out on his own. The business owners he’d chat with between deliveries all knew him by name and liked him enough. Why not cut out the middleman?

Smith enrolled in the Downtown Long Beach Alliance small business program and got his business license in 2019. He named his business Alley Cat Deliveries because of all the side streets and alleyway shortcuts he’d memorized biking through the city.

He first approached Pie Bar’s owner, Laurie Gray, on what it would take to earn her business.

“She said, ‘Well, they [delivery apps] are taking 24-30% of my profits from me. My question is: How are you going to be different?’” Smith recalled.

Gray was referring to the fees delivery apps like GrubHub, Uber Eats, DoorDash and Postmates charge restaurants for its service, with some delivery apps reportedly charging up to 30% of their revenue per order.

Smith realized that he could get a leg up on the delivery apps by only charging the customer a flat rate for his delivery service. He settled on a competitive \$5, though today he charges \$9.

“So she gave me the account. Romeo Chocolates gave me his account. It took me a year to get 4th Horseman,” Smith said. Today he boasts 11 local business accounts, including District Wine, Pita Pitaki, Long Beach Creamery and The Attic.

“They’re not losing anything with me,” he said. “That’s why I’m different. That’s why I want people to use us—because we’re not taking anything from these people. Everyone wins.”

Convincing customers to make the switch from the convenient tap-to-pay delivery apps to his service was the biggest hurdle. For this, Smith relied on consumers’ shop-local mentality. That, and his promise to return 20% of his weekly sales back to the community, be it through food, clothing or toy donations to local organizations, or helping out when he saw a need.

He’s made good on that promise over the years. After the 2020 looting, Robb sold T-shirts and used the \$6,000 he raised to repair the broken windows and storefronts of nine Downtown businesses, including Pie Bar, Romeo Chocolates, Kress Market and Deli and iNails and Spa. This past Thanksgiving, he helped sponsor 11 families with multi-course Thanksgiving dinners.

Making a pit stop on our Long Beach Creamery run, we pulled into the AIDS Food Store lot to drop off a trunk full of cereal boxes for their annual cereal drive, which Smith also participated in last year.

“It’s community supporting community,” he said. It’s a point he speaks on fervently, mentioned at least



Robb Smith stacks baked foods from Long Beach Creamery into a freezer bag for delivery Friday, Dec. 3, 2021. Photo by Cheantay Jensen.

four times during our delivery excursion, but with good reason.

“When we were homeless for a year, Long Beach Coffee & Tea is the one who had our backs. That’s how Santa came to our house two years ago for Christmas when I didn’t have a pot to piss in,” Smith explained.

That same Christmas, Long Beach Pedal Movement donated a beach cruiser to help Smith make his deliveries. After a year and a half of courier delivery, a local business owner offered their car for his runs until he was able to purchase his own in August 2020.

“And I sat in the car and felt for the first time, like, this mine,” he reflected. “I just felt pride. I felt happy.”

He’s had a lot of time since to get used to his car. He’ll run deliveries for 10 hours a day, usually, though it’s not uncommon for him to work nearly 17 hours during the holidays, his busiest season, before climbing into bed at his home in West Long Beach.

“I feel old now. I’ve driven so much in two years,” the 36-year-old said.

He’s not as lithe as he was during his courier days, but he still puts his 6’1” frame to the test. When we arrived at the Creamery’s Downtown location, he stuffed over 40 pint-sized ice-cream containers into a freezer bag and lugged it, with remarkable speed, into the backseat of his car.

Back up Atlantic Avenue, we returned to Long Beach Creamery in Bixby Knolls. As Smith deposited the pints of ice cream into the freezer, in order of their packaging dates, owner Dina Amadril said what she appreciates most is Smith’s attention to detail.

“Robb goes the extra mile,” she said. “He’s always packing it up to make sure the inventory is right, using FIFO: first-in-first-out.”

Smith said he’d learned the method while working in the hospitality industry—one of his many odd jobs. He’s been a server at a pizza spot in Hawthorne, where he grew up; a manager at Starbucks; a service associate at a car dealership. He was an aerospace job recruiter at his last gig.

“I loved it, but I lost that job not having daycare,” Smith explained.

With each job, Smith was able to take away a piece of knowledge or a bit of savvy that’s helped him have that extra edge with Alley Cat. With his pizza runs, for instance, he always keeps the pies in a thermal bag so they stay level and hot.

“I’m not an on-demand service,” he cautioned. “I’m more of a personalized service.”

A glowing review on Yelp relayed a particularly astonishing (and atypical) run Smith took in pursuit of a Dodger’s jersey his client requested and needed before an evening game. He went to Dick’s Sporting Goods, found they were sold out. Then, on the way back from an LAX run, made a pit stop in Santee Alley (in LA’s Fashion District) and haggled a \$100 jersey down to \$70, all while FaceTiming his client so she could see exactly what she was getting.

“This man sure does go above and beyond the call of duty,” the client signed off in her review.

Testimonials like this make it easy to understand why Smith said 90% of his clientele are returning customers. But it’s also why he hesitates to hire people, though at times he’s desperate for the help.

“It’s really hard to find good people. I’ve tried to hire people, and I’ve had some good ones. I’ve had some bad ones, but no one could carry it the way I do. I just never want anyone to be let down,” he said.

Getting more organized is a bigger priority for him at this point. All of his orders are done via text or phone call and jotted down in the Notes app. Still, Smith envisions a bigger picture. One possibly with employees driving golf carts—a smaller carbon footprint, he explained.

“But then I’d sell ad space, called Cool Cat, you could see on the carts,” he said. “My mind doesn’t stop going.”

*Alley Cat Deliveries can be contacted via Instagram, Facebook or by phone at 310-529-4839. Food deliveries from restaurants cost \$9; grocery store deliveries cost \$25. Alley Cat Deliveries has also launched its Winter Well Wishes Drive and is looking for sponsors to help purchase toys, clothes, blankets, socks and more. More information can be found on Alley Cat Deliveries’ Instagram and Facebook.* ■

Sweet Grass

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Chhom said the idea struck him.

“I went over there one time and there’s a little lady pressing the sugarcane, she’s doing it by herself, maybe like one or two other workers, and they had a line over there,” he recalled. “I was like, I’m going to re-innovate this concept and just revamp it and make it more modern. And not only that, I’m going to utilize social media.”

Chhom began preparing the sugarcane juice from his apartment and delivered it to people, “guerilla-style marketing” as he called it. After a few months he was able to purchase a food truck and debuted at Ten Mile Brewing.

“The first day we opened, it was just madness. It was like the whole parking lot was filled. And the streets were filled out. There was all types of people in the parking lot,” he said.

Working seven days a week he “grinded and grinded, hustled and hustled,” to the point where he said he was suffering from mental breakdowns out of sheer exhaustion. But, it paid off, and within a year he had the keys to his first shop.

“A lot of the stuff that I do, and a lot of why I have hustled so hard is because of the hard life that my parents and my grandparents endured to get to America,” he said. “I just wanted to demonstrate my ability to solve problems and overcome obstacles, I want people to do the same.”

Still, Chhom said he’s grateful to his community for supporting him. And with his juice bar, he said he plans to create space and use his platform to give back, be it through community outreach, fundraising, or simply by inviting small businesses to sell wares in his shop.

In December 2020, Chhom raised \$2,000 to help pay for a new playground for The Muse Academy in Long Beach, which serves young low-income children as well as foster children.

“I wouldn’t be in my position today, if I didn’t have so much support from people that come by, tip me and buy drinks and do all this stuff, you know.... there’s this African proverb that still really rings strong with me. They say if you want to go fast, go alone but if you want to go far, go together.”

*Sweet Grass, at 3545 Atlantic Ave., is open Tuesday-Sunday from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.* ■



Sugarcane juice is extracted from a cold-press proprietary machine at Sweet Grass, a new sugarcane-based juice bar in Long Beach Tuesday, Nov. 23, 2021. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

# Happy Holidays

Throughout the challenges of 2021, thousands of men and women have worked to keep cargo moving – thank you all. And to the entire community, we wish you a joyous holiday season and a healthy and prosperous 2022!





# MERRY CHRISTMAS

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