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FEBRUARY 2026

LONG BEACH
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# In flurry of new laws, the state is taking power from cities that block housing

**By Melissa Evans**

New laws intended to grow California's housing supply have been enacted at an unprecedented pace since 2020, with many taking away the power cities had to block new homes within their boundaries.

Gov. Gavin Newsom signed over 60 new housing bills in 2025 alone, ramping up pressure to ease a dearth in supply that has locked many people out of the state's housing market. In late 2025, potential homeowners needed an average $221,000 annual income to buy a median-priced home. Rents have risen as well: In Long Beach, a 1,200 square-foot apartment now goes for over $3,100 — a 25% rise since 2019.

Newsom has been blunt in calling out specific cities that resist more housing — like Huntington Beach's "pathetic NIMBY behavior," he said in December — and has threatened lawsuits and other penalties on cities big and small.

Whether this is mere political bluster or necessary change depends on your view, but cities across the state are navigating a complex array of new rules that aim to simplify approval processes and levy penalties on those who won't allow new homes.

The Business Journal recently sat down with Christopher Koontz, Long Beach's director of Community Development, to understand where our city stands in its housing supply,

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**Drone maker Anduril announces $1 billion expansion in Long Beach**
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*Thomas R. Cordova/Long Beach Business Journal*

Port of Long Beach CEO Noel Hacegaba stands over a map of the port and the International Gateway Bridge.

# New port CEO has a fondness for football and a drive to win the trade game

**By Barbara Kingsley-Wilson**

For 8 ½ years, the Port of Long Beach has been led by an aficionado of classical music who saw to it that the sounds of Gershwin, Aaron Copland and Etta James filled the hall when hundreds gathered for the port's annual presentation to city leaders.

Now a new guy is in charge, and he's more rock and roll.

In his introduction for his State of the Port speech in January, new CEO Noel Hacegaba came out swinging his Gibson Les Paul '50s electric guitar. The opening video featured Hacegaba fronting for a group of port-employed musicians called "The TEUs" — a play off a container measurement in shipping — with shots of the port's cranes and ships in the background. After the video finished, Hacegaba strolled out, his silhouette visible, rock star–style, as he was bathed in smoke and blue light. It was fun to watch and more than a little over the top.

"That's the part about him that makes people feel relaxed," said Frank Colonna, president of the Long Beach Board of Harbor Commissioners. "He's not plastic. What you see is what you get."

Mario Cordero, the classical pianist who retired as CEO last year, was "more of a baseball guy and I'm more of a football guy," Hacegaba said. Where Cordero, who oversaw the Green Port initiatives as well as record influxes of cargo during and after the pandemic, was seen as genial, accessible and largely uninterested in the spotlight, Hacegaba brings the urgency of a quarterback facing fourth down and no timeouts.

Hacegaba's game plan involves doubling capacity at the port — moving from 9.9 million 20-foot container units (TEUs) in 2025, a record, to 20 million by 2050. It also means demonstrating that the Port of Long Beach is a player in the shipping world, as Hacegaba flew to Davos, Switzerland, in January to speak at the World Economic Forum, the only representative from a U.S. port.

"2050 is the new goal line," said Hacegaba in an interview at the Port of Long Beach offices. He talks urgently about the need to "expand our playbook," and "update our game plan and move to a hurry-up offense ... because 24 years may sound like a long time, but in our world, when you're delivering infrastructure, when you're navigating fundamental changes and realignments and global trade, 24 years is not a long time."

Hacegaba speaks with the confidence and vocal projection of a

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*Photos by Thomas R. Cordova/Long Beach Business Journal*

Kieran Whitney wears 3D glasses while using a flight simulator at Cal State University Long Beach.

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## NEWS



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# ON THE COVER

## *New CEO* *from page 1*

seasoned preacher. He is the pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in La Puente. It's a part-time job to which he devotes his Sundays.

"To me, everything I do is a form of service," he said. "When I'm at work I serve my team, I serve my customers, my stakeholders. Having that perspective, that fulfillment, energizes me."

On a recent Sunday soon after the new year, Hacegaba spoke to his congregation on the finite nature of time, moving smoothly between English and Spanish: "Each of us gets the same amount of time every day," he said. "Even if you buy a watch that costs you $10,000, that expensive watch isn't going to give you a second more."

Hacegaba, 49, who lives in East Long Beach with his wife and two daughters, calls time a precious commodity and he meters it carefully. He rises about 4:30 every morning to work out and enjoy quiet time and set priorities for his day. He said he was always governed by discipline and credited his parents with instilling it.

Hacegaba's great-grandfather was Japanese, and he and a friend agreed to sail to the U.S. after World War I. Somehow they ended up in Mexico. A clerk at immigration there mistakenly changed the family name from Hacegawa to Hacegaba, and it has stayed that way for generations.

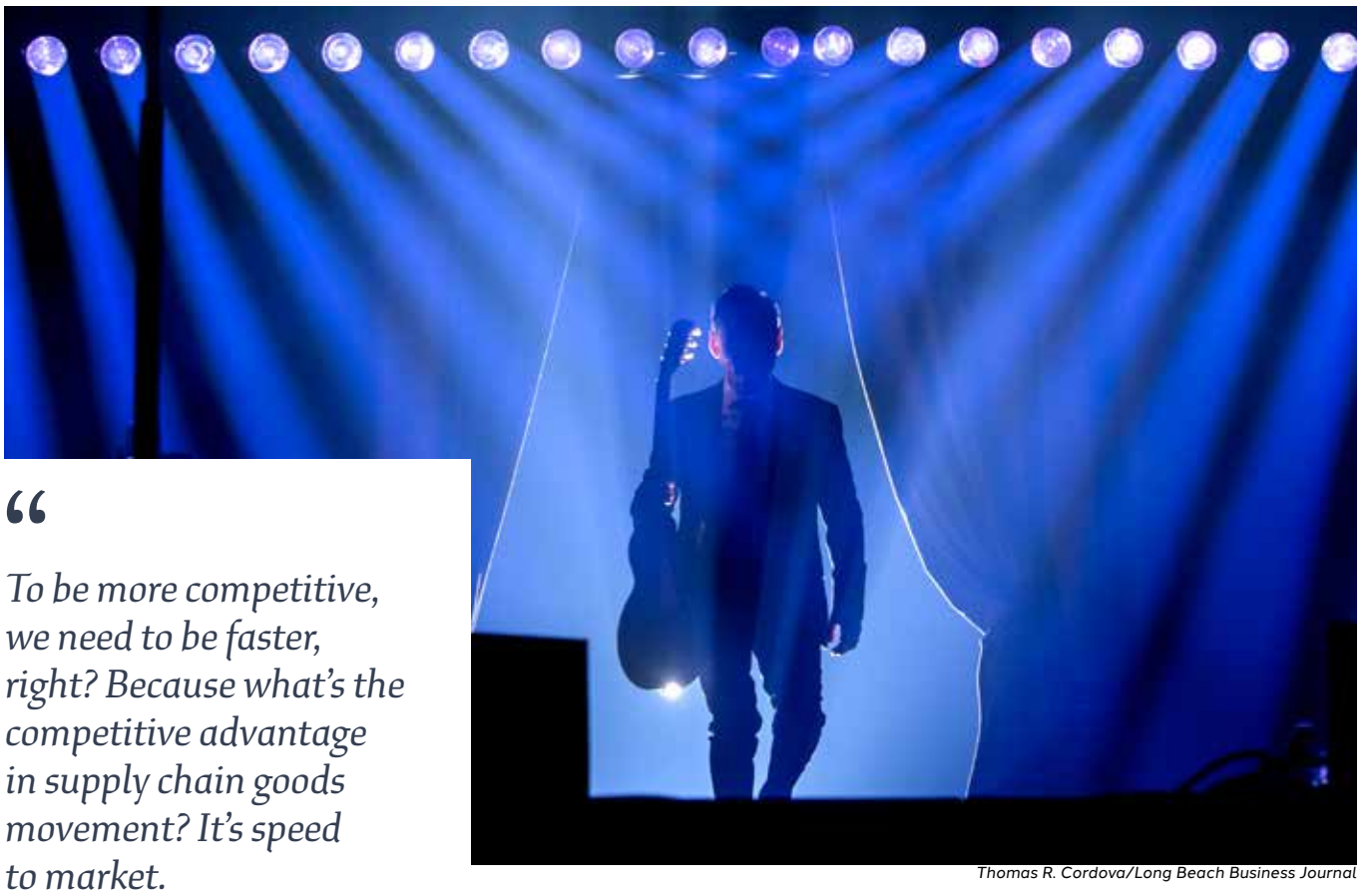
The L.A. native grew up in Baldwin Park and often spent Friday nights eating burgers at Southern California's first In-N-Out there. He grew up watching Marcus Allen and Bo Jackson play for the Raiders and dreamed of being a scientist like Jacques Cousteau. Then he switched his sights to engineering and eventually business and economics.

His first language was Spanish and his parents, who came from Mexicali, worked in manufacturing and never finished high school. But they encouraged him to get an education. He got a full ride to USC and earned two undergraduate degrees and two master's before getting his doctorate in public administration from the University of LaVerne.

"My parents, because they didn't have the benefit of an education … it was their desire for their children to pursue higher education." He was the first in his family to graduate from college.

The longtime Raiders fan is committed to his hurry-up offense even with trade uncertainty swirling around the port, the second-largest in the U.S. next to the Port of Los Angeles.

That means spending $3.2 billion on improving infrastructure with help from federal grant money, a project launched by his predecessor. The Pier B On-Dock Rail Support Facility, slated for completion in 2032, is designed to help move goods directly to trains and send those trains to distribution centers all over the country.



Thomas R. Cordova/Long Beach Business Journal

> *"To be more competitive, we need to be faster, right? Because what's the competitive advantage in supply chain goods movement? It's speed to market.*
>
> —Noel Hacegaba

It takes just under four days to unload a container, log it in and put it on a train. Hacegaba wants to trim that time to 24 hours.

"To be more competitive, we need to be faster, right?" he said. "Because what's the competitive advantage in supply chain goods movement? It's speed to market." He plans to invest in digital tools such as CargoNav that will help track goods in real time. He believes the rail project will facilitate quicker goods movement, getting goods right onto trains and trimming the number of polluting trucks chugging up the 710 Freeway.

"We're located on the West Coast of the U.S., but only a third of all of our containers stay here," Hacegaba said. "Two-thirds of the containers that arrive here end up east of the Mississippi. So … the way we beat the competition … is by moving containers from Long Beach to all of these key inland markets as quickly as possible, faster than Savannah, faster than New York, New Jersey."

The Long Beach port and other West Coast ports are facing "headwinds," said John McCown, author of the McCown Report that tracks shipping trends in the top 10 ports. Improvement in goods movement over recent years favors East Coast ports that are closer to U.S. population centers and the Midwest. East Coast ports are closer to 75% of higher population centers as opposed to 25% for the West Coast ports. The widening of the Panama Canal in 2016 made it easier to move goods from Asia to ports in the eastern and Gulf states.

Another challenge is that the Port of Long Beach has a 4:1 trade deficit, meaning four times as many loaded containers sail in than sail out, which makes it less attractive as a destination port, McCown said, because

Thomas R. Cordova/Long Beach Business Journal

Top: CEO Noel Hacegaba walked onto the stage holding a guitar at his first State of the Port speech in January. Bottom: At his first marquee speech, new port CEO Noel Hacegaba outlined an urgent vision for expansion.

it's seen as less efficient. The largest container growth area for the port last year was in empties outbound and inbound, at 6.7% and 5.8%, respectively.

That reality infuses Hacegaba's evangelizing for port expansion. "Part of updating our playbook" means identifying new and emerging markets such as Latin America and the Indian subcontinent, he said. More than 90% of the port's shipments currently come from East Asian countries.

Hacegaba wants the world to know the port is going big, thinking big, trade uncertainty be damned.

A chance encounter prompted Hacegaba's move from waste movement to goods movement. As director of municipal services with Republic Services, a waste disposal company, he decided to attend a State of the Long Beach Port event 15 years ago.

"One of my assignments … was to promote the company in Long Beach. I lived in Long Beach, I worked in Long Beach. And so I started attending events in Long Beach, and one of the events that I attended was the state of the port," Hacegaba said. "I bought my ticket online. I showed up the day of the event, I checked in, got my seating assignment, went to the table, and every seat was taken. So either someone took my seat or there was a mishap. … The only seats available were at the tables way in the end, right next to the exit door. So I said, this is perfect. I can sneak out a little early."

Hacegaba found himself chatting with the port's director of HR, who asked for his business card. Ten days later he got a letter with a job announcement from the port. He thought executive director to the board of harbor commissioners sounded like "a cool job." He started in 2010.

Mario Cordero, the outgoing port CEO who interviewed Hacegaba 15 years ago, said Hacegaba came across as a fast learner who had "equanimity in his demeanor." Cordero pointed to

***Hacegaba*** *page 5*

# Hacegaba *from page 4*

the new CEO as he was being congratulated on the dais after his State of the Port presentation. "He dressed then as he does now — professional." Hacegaba grew to become Cordero's "No. 2" guy and confidant. When Hacegaba became COO, he was on his way to the top job.

Hacegaba's move to the port "wasn't planned. It wasn't something I was looking for," said Hacegaba. "It was what I call providential. And here I am, almost 16 years later, having the time of my life and just enjoying every challenge and every moment."

Those moments have to include reacting to uncertainty. He recalls when Donald Trump was re-elected, some in his field were saying they'd "seen this movie before" regarding 2018 tariffs imposed against China, leading to a dive in the stock market and other repercussions during Trump's first term. "What we saw unfold (in 2025) was not a rerun, and it was not a sequel. What we saw unfold was sweeping and unprecedented." The start of the year featured talk that Trump would levy more tariffs against Europe before apparently changing his mind in January. Trump levied an array of tariffs in 2025.

There's also the ongoing reality of port air pollution. While pollution has decreased markedly since 2005, the ports of Long Beach and L.A. are still the biggest fixed source polluters in the L. A. basin.

The implementation of state air regulations helped force changes to cleaner trucks. The Clean Air Action Plans at the ports of L.A. and Long Beach have helped improve air around the port, said Sarah Rees, deputy executive officer for planning rule development and implementation for the South Coast Air Quality Management District. AQMD last year reached an agreement with the ports to reduce pollution by 2029. "A lot has been done. … There's still a long way to go because that huge port complex, L.A. and Long Beach is still a major polluter and still affecting the surrounding neighborhoods."

The Port of Long Beach alone moves almost one-fifth of the country's cargo and supports 691,000 Southern California jobs. About 20,000 people work at the 3,520-acre port complex. The Long Beach and L.A. ports together move roughly 40% of all U.S. container imports.

The move to trains, to faster goods movement, plays into the Green Port plan and Hacegaba's expansionist vision. Like a coach preparing for the season, Hacegaba seems driven to boost his team's stats and show the shipping world the Port of Long Beach projects strength and energy.

"You know what [legendary coach] Vince Lombardi once said, 'I've never lost a football game. I just ran out of time.'" Hacegaba said. "We are shifting to a hurry-up offense to win, because we play to win here. I don't want us to run out of time." ■


*Thomas R. Cordova/Long Beach Business Journal*

Mayor Rex Richardson, second from right, and Community Development Director Christopher Koontz, center, celebrate the more than 5,000 homes that have been entitled in the city over the last three years.

# Housing *from page 1*

and which new laws have had the biggest impact.

**Long Beach has picked up the pace**

Koontz admits the city wasn't building a lot of housing a decade ago. In 2014, it permitted 300 housing construction projects; in 2024, that number rose to 1,704. Officials expect to see a continued rise in construction, as well as entitlements — a preliminary step in a long approval process — when 2025 numbers are released early this year.

The city was required to make room for over 26,000 new units between 2021 and 2029, which would amount to a roughly 14% rise in its total housing inventory of 181,500 units.

The city adopted a framework for meeting that aggressive target and has gradually rezoned the city, parcel by parcel, to implement the plan. This tedious process, however, is not the same as actual construction — the latter of which is mostly out of the city's control.

Higher interest rates and tariffs on building materials, among other factors, have slowed construction over the past few years due to lack of financing. But Koontz said he's seeing signs that builders may be gaining access to more money.

Six months ago, projects weren't moving, he said. This year, "We do have projects that have been able to get loans."

The city does have control in some areas, like customer service and faster turnaround times for entitlements, permits, engineering and more. Improvements in internal processes have already created "repeat customers" who want to work in Long Beach, he said.

Holland Partner Group, for example, built the Volta complex at Seventh Street and Pacific Avenue downtown, then pitched plans for an even larger project nearby at Third and Pacific. The firm then won approval in 2023 for a development on the opposite end of the city's coast, the 281-unit complex at Studebaker Road and Pacific Coast Highway that is now visibly underway.

"Developers who have a positive experience here tend to come back," Koontz said.

**Laws that have impacted Long Beach**

Which new laws have led to new homes in Long Beach?

The "1, 2 and 3" answer, Koontz said, is the cumulative effect of ADU reform.

Roughly 40% of the city's housing supply consists of detached, single-family homes, which occupy an outsized share of physical space in a coastal city that is already built out. The state, as well as the city, has made it far easier and less expensive for homeowners to build secondary homes on these lots.

The city often touts its success with ADUs after reducing fees, removing zoning restrictions and standardizing approvals, among other changes — all requirements of new state legislation.

Of the city's 1,704 approved construction permits in 2024, nearly half were for ADUs.

The benefits of ADU construction, Koontz said, go beyond the numbers: This particular type of housing is being added more evenly throughout the entire city rather than being concentrated in one place, like downtown.

"We have our nine council districts, and there are ADUs being built in every district," he said.

In a similar vein, new legislation that standardized building requirements — eliminating subjective decisions that increase risk for developers — has spurred interest among builders locally, Koontz said.

A new law that caused significant uproar, SB 9, allowed homeowners to split their lots to accommodate duplexes. It banned subjective denials of these projects around factors like "protecting the character of a neighborhood" — which Koontz said can mean "10 different things in 10 different cities."

That infuriated many homeowners who are indeed protective of their streets and neighborhoods, though the city hasn't seen steep demand in permits for projects. (The legislation is, however, raising alarm in Los Angeles as communities rebuild in the wake of last year's fires.)

Likewise, SB 330, signed in 2019, established a standard checklist of requirements that cannot be changed during the approval process.

From his view, Koontz said these reforms have been largely positive, creating certainty for developers on questions ranging from building height to the type of stucco used on exteriors.

**Impacts remain to be seen**

The flurry of new laws has caused some frustration, however. "We spend a lot of time and effort every year just trying to understand everything that changed in just one year's time," Koontz said.

It often takes years or decades to see the impact from new laws, he said — and often years to clarify or correct mistakes in laws that were previously passed.

A prime example is SB 79, passed late last year, which angered many homeowners throughout Long Beach and the state. The law allows significant density around public transportation that initially included bus stops, which would have had a massive impact on the entire city.

The law was pared down significantly, and will likely include only the city's eight Metro stops in downtown, the westside and North Long Beach. The state, however, must first clean up critical language defining tiers that dictate density levels, among other fixes.

Koontz said he does hope the state Legislature will take a breather on changes to housing law.

"Running this operation — no one elected me — but I kind of feel like it's time for a break [in new legislation] and to sort of catch up and implement the changes that have already been made," he said. ■

EDUCATION

# LBCC will soon offer its first four-year degree

By Kate Raphael

When Jeanne Evangelista enrolled at Long Beach City College in 2018, she realized she wanted to become a librarian. But LBCC offered only a certificate or associate's degree in library and information sciences, so Evangelista had to pursue further education elsewhere to realize her career goals.

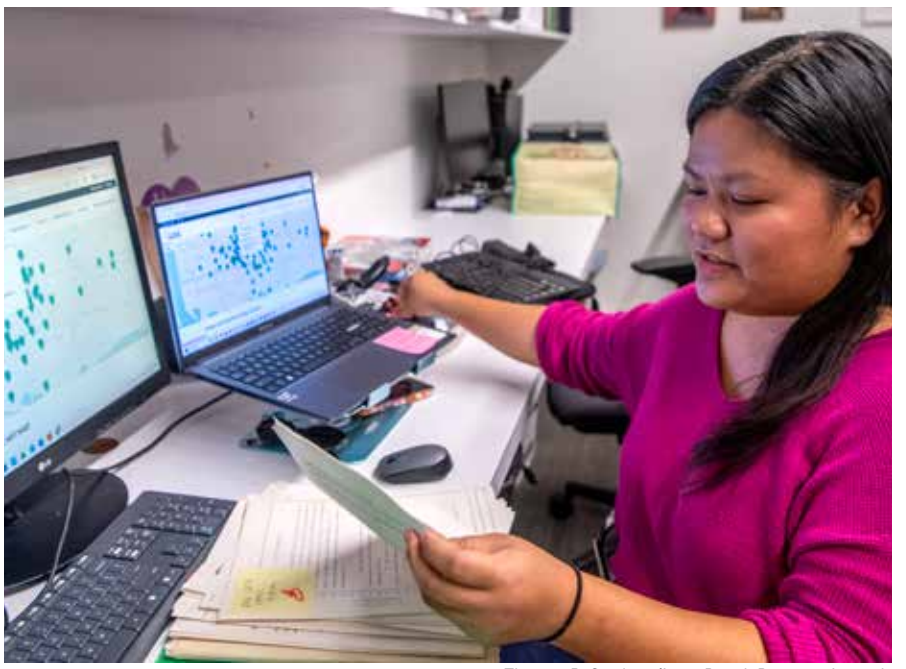
That may change with Long Beach City College's announcement of its first four-year degree, a bachelor of science in library and information science, set to launch in fall 2027 and fill an "educational vacuum" in the field and region, LBCC Professor Colin Williams said. The program aims to prepare students to enter the workforce immediately as well as create an affordable path to librarianship.

California offers the largest inventory of library certificate programs in the nation, according to the Association of College and Research Libraries. Yet there are no bachelor's programs in library science in the state; LBCC's will be the first.

That void has forced students like Evangelista to pivot to other disciplines to complete their bachelor's degrees or leave the state to earn a bachelor's in library science.

Even nationally, few such bachelor's programs exist, Williams said, as the library science field has shifted its focus to master's degrees, a requirement to become a librarian. Usually, an associate's degree is necessary to become a library technician.

The dearth of bachelor's programs reflects a gap in library science training, not the utility of the degree, said Walter Butler, director of library and information services at Santa Monica College. Many library jobs still require bachelor's degrees, even if not in library science (reflecting the scarcity of those programs), which results in a library workforce without the specific training a bachelor's in library science could provide, Butler said. LBCC's program is "going to strengthen the library profession," he said.



Thomas R. Cordova/Long Beach Business Journal

Jeanne Evangelista, public art associate, at her workspace at the Arts Council for Long Beach

The new program's course of study is designed to be responsive to the rapidly changing digital landscape and prepare students for career pathways in both traditional and nontraditional library settings, said Williams, curriculum chair of LBCC's library science program.

The program will teach students about data, archives, catalogues, and digital tools and resources, including applications for large language models. Students will also need to develop the soft skills necessary to meet the diverse, growing needs of library patrons, Butler said.

Legislation passed by Govs. Jerry Brown and Gavin Newsom paved the way for California community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees. Yet, California State University campuses have blocked more than a dozen of these degrees, arguing they duplicate CSU programs, according to EdSource.

As part of the application to the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, Williams had to show the program does not compete with CSU or University of California offerings.

Williams also had to demonstrate labor market demand (an analysis projected nearly 600 unfilled library science jobs statewide, annually) as well as earning potential (library science job seekers with bachelor's degrees may earn $23,000 more than those without).

Critically, he had to show that students wanted the program. Of 101 LBCC library science students surveyed, 89% reported being very interested in a bachelor's degree program.

Evangelista said she would have jumped at the opportunity to pursue a bachelor's at LBCC and save money. Instead, she transferred to Cal State Long Beach and majored in history, before undertaking her master's in library and information science at San Jose State University.

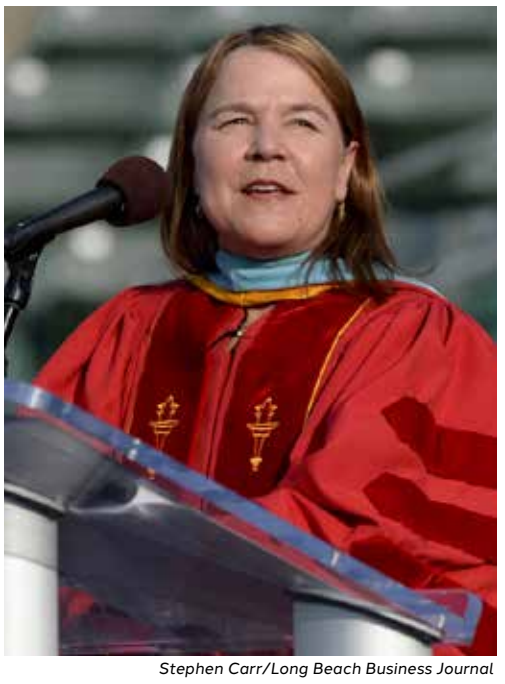
Now, Evangelista oversees LBCC library and information science interns at the Arts Council for Long Beach. Evangelista said her students, who help digitize art and documents, would benefit from archival and collections education, as well as skills they can apply outside of a traditional library setting.

One of her interns, current LBCC library science student Marya Long, said she would have "stuck with the associate's degree," even if the bachelor's were available. But she would take upper-level library science courses "a la carte" to strengthen her training.

For Stephanie Pacheco, the affordability and flexibility of LBCC bachelor's program is a "huge relief," she said. Pacheco had almost completed her bachelor's in theater when "my need to pay rent superseded my academic ambitions," she said. She

**Degree** *page 13*

# LBUSD Superintendant Jill Baker announces retirement



Stephen Carr/Long Beach Business Journal

LBUSD Superintendent Jill Baker speaks to graduates during the California Academics of Mathematics and Science class of 2022 commencement ceremony.

By Kate Raphael

Long Beach Unified Superintendent Jill Baker announced Jan. 15 that she will retire at the end of the 2025-26 school year, after over 34 years working for the district.

A replacement has not been announced. The district said more information about the leadership transition will "be shared in the months ahead."

Baker was promoted to the top job from her role as deputy superintendent in August 2020, becoming the first woman to hold the job and replacing longtime superintendent Chris Steinhauser. She beat out nine applicants for the position and was largely considered the frontrunner, the Long Beach Post previously reported.

"Student experience and performance have remained central drivers in my work," Baker said in an announcement video, referring to her long career as an educator, which began in the classroom.

She assumed the superintendent role at a pivotal moment and was tasked with navigating school closures and reopenings during the COVID-19 pandemic. More recently, she has led the district through a controversial grading policy, new rules on phone use designed to reclaim attention and protect student mental health, initiatives to promote Black student achievement and belonging, a revamped approach to school safety and a series of cuts and strategies aimed at addressing the district's dire financial situation tied to declining enrollment.

"Dr. Baker has led Long Beach Unified with integrity, vision, and deep humanity," Board of Education President Diana Craighead said in a press release. "Her commitment to students, staff, and community has strengthened our District and positioned us well for the future."

Craighead and her fellow board of trustees extended Baker's contract through October 2029 at the Oct. 15, 2025, meeting, in what Craighead called "a vote of confidence," one customarily conferred to senior district staff, though the extension provoked frustration that superintendent-level contracts were secured at a time when teachers were in extended contract negotiations.

Baker didn't give a specific reason for her retirement or its timing.

"The decision to retire has not rested lightly with me because there is so much more to do. At the same time, I hold deep trust in those who are here and those who will come next," she said in the video.

Indeed, her successor will inherit the problems of a large budget deficit, declining enrollment and fallout from recently announced cuts to programs and staff. ■

*Thomas R. Cordova/Long Beach Business Journal*

On the first day of school in 2025, Lakewood High School staff members greeted students with high-fives.

# As it tries to close a large budget gap, LBUSD urges students to attend class

**By Kate Raphael**

Empty seats are straining Long Beach Unified's already-thin wallet. Now, amid staff cuts and cost-saving measures aimed at shrinking a large deficit, the school district is also trying to boost attendance, hoping to recoup state funds it's left on the table in recent years.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, attendance hovered around 95% to 96%, the district said in a recent budget update, and one in eight students was chronically absent. During and immediately after the pandemic, LBUSD attendance plummeted and chronic absenteeism skyrocketed, reflecting a national trend.

Attendance has improved since then, but numbers never rebounded to pre-pandemic levels.

The district is adjusting to a new normal, where a quarter of students were chronically absent the last two years, according to the California Department of Education. As pressure mounts to increase attendance, educators say they're being pushed not just to teach but to make sure students are attending class. District leaders, meanwhile, are advocating for changes in the state's school funding formula, arguing the current system disadvantages large urban districts like Long Beach.

Chronically absent students, who miss at least 10% of instructional days, are a major drag on districtwide attendance, which sits at 93.4% this school year. That's only a couple of percentage points lower than historic averages, but even seemingly small dips in attendance have big implications. With each percentage drop, the district loses $8 million annually in state funding, according to Superintendent Jill Baker.

Low attendance is compounded by decreasing enrollment (LBUSD has lost more than 16,000 students — and significant state funding — in the last decade). Now, the district is operating at a $70 million deficit and searching the couch cushions for change. Attendance is "the most positive and effective means of addressing the District's financial situation," Baker and Yumi Takahashi, the district's chief business and financial officer, said in a recent memo addressed to members of the board of education.

The new "You Belong!" campaign "centers on the message that students belong in school every day" and includes competitions and rewards to incentivize attendance, as well as an interactive attendance tracker, a spokesperson for the district said. The messaging is intended for students and parents, she said, yet teachers said they're urged to boost attendance, too.

"We're hearing it at every staff meeting," said a special education teacher who requested to remain anonymous for fear of blowback. She regularly sends notes home, emphasizing the importance of kids being present, but "it's so frustrating" to be "tasked with" boosting attendance, she said, because "I have zero control over whether a kid comes to school on a given day."

Some schools have begun offering incentives to students with high attendance. But the students winning awards are already present, the special education teacher said, while those who most need support, "the person who's really, really struggling to get their kid here on time on a regular basis," won't even be in the running.

Repeatedly telling students to show up does not seem to be working, she said and floated the idea of an attendance policy "with more teeth." Yet punitive truancy policies of the past may not be productive, she said: "The old teeth don't really fit anymore." Nor are they legal. A

***Attendance*** *page 13*

# How to help homeless college students: A CSULB professor studies what works

By Amy DiPierro, EdSource

Professor Rashida Crutchfield

Sean DuFrene/Cal State Long Beach

*This story was originally published by EdSource. Sign up for their daily newsletter at Edsource.org.*

When Rashida Crutchfield began her doctoral degree at Cal State Long Beach in 2009, she knew she wanted to study the college experience for homeless students.

There was one problem. She couldn't find any research about college homelessness. "The imposter syndrome in me thought I was just doing it wrong," said Crutchfield, now a professor at CSULB's School of Social Work.

So Crutchfield contacted Barbara Duffield, a leading advocate for children experiencing homelessness in the K-12 school system. "I said, 'I'm not finding anything about the college experience for students,'" Crutchfield recalled. She said, 'There isn't anything. That's your job now.'"

That job has kept Crutchfield busy ever since. Her 2018 research finding that nearly 11% of California State University students experienced homelessness coincided with an emerging consensus among California lawmakers and higher education leaders that housing and food insecurity can be a major barrier for would-be college graduates. Together with her colleagues at CSULB's Center for Equitable Higher Education, the research arm of the university's basic needs program, Crutchfield has also assessed how well college programs intended to help meet students' basic needs are working.

One such program is College Focused Rapid Rehousing, launched in 2020 at selected community colleges and California State University campuses, including CSULB. Backed by tens of millions of dollars in state funding, the aim of the pilot is to help students complete college by first moving them into stable housing, taking a more intensive approach than emergency housing vouchers and other short-term help. In a rapid rehousing program, colleges and community housing agencies provide students with rental subsidies, academic support and case management that prepares them to live independently.

The center's final evaluation in 2025 found that students who participated in the rapid rehousing pilot were more likely to stay in school than those receiving only a short-term subsidy. About 70% of former rapid rehousing participants surveyed reported living in an apartment they directly leased or owned a year after leaving the program.

Such evaluations of programs focused on addressing homelessness and other issues on campuses are one of the ways colleges can make sure their programs are providing what students need — and not merely "what we feel works," Crutchfield said.

"It's easy to make decisions because this feels right, rather than what is," said Crutchfield, a 2025 winner of Cal State's Wang Family Excellence Award honoring achievements by the university system's faculty and staff. "Once we establish a program — once students hear that that program does this, and that doesn't work for them — that reputation lasts, and so it undermines our success with students."

EdSource spoke with Crutchfield about how she began researching college housing instability and the potential impact of longer-term investments in rehousing students.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**How did you first get interested in student housing and basic needs?**

I was working (as a social worker and volunteer coordinator) for Covenant House California (in Hollywood), which provides shelter and services for youth experiencing homelessness. And some of the residents there were going to college, and they were experiencing barriers that had less to do with their homelessness and more to do with the typical functioning of colleges and universities.

So, for instance, we had a resident who had gone to community college to register, and she'd gone to financial aid because there was a problem with her financial aid. And the financial aid administrators said, "We need your parents' tax information and the student's for financial aid purposes." The student said that she was homeless and she didn't have them. The financial aid officer said, "Well, you don't look homeless, and you're probably just fighting with your parents. You need to go home and get those, and you can't come to school without them, and you're probably going to miss this semester anyway."

Six months, a whole semester, would have been devastating for her. So she came back weeping. We have a feisty Irish nun named Sister Margaret Farrell at Covenant House, and she went up to that financial aid office and fought for her, and she got into housing.

But I thought, "What happens to everyone who doesn't have a feisty Irish nun?"

**What are some examples of really robust programs and services that you've seen emerge in California to serve homeless students?**

College Focused Rapid Rehousing was a very significant investment by the California Legislature to support robust programs. For many campuses, we started with what I might call short-term approaches to addressing homelessness, and that might include short stays in dorms, anywhere from a few days to a few weeks, and then maybe a one-time emergency grant of $1,000.

Those things are really helpful if you have a short-term need, but if you're experiencing long-term homelessness, that's not going to do it. And so College Focused Rapid Rehousing is a strong model for a deeper investment in students, which includes case management and longer-term subsidy for student housing.

**You're researching rapid rehousing in the context of college. Are there any surprising findings or policy implications that are coming out of that work?**

(Students who have robust support) are definitely doing better than students who are receiving the short-term support, but they also are matching or exceeding the larger population of students. And I think that speaks to both the need for stabilization, the financial stabilization, but it also speaks to the belonging, connectedness that students experience.

I think political tides can suggest to us that helping more students with shorter-term responses can feel better, but deeper investment in a smaller number of students has more actual beneficial outcomes for students. I think that's the thing that I really want to drive forward.

**Where do you feel that California colleges and universities could be doing more?**

We really want to at least continue, if not expand, the work in College Focused Rapid Rehousing, or other kinds of responses to homelessness and food insecurity. For our students, I would love to see a linkage between our efforts for addressing homelessness more broadly to include students. Right now, they're very separate. There's education over here and housing, homelessness over here. For this population, there's clear overlap, because students don't end their lives in their universities. They're also out here in our communities. And so the joining of those efforts at every level is (an) opportunity and room for connectivity and growth.

We, inside of our institutions, have to sustain our commitment to addressing these needs. Our staff, who are working directly with students who are experiencing these issues, are often wearing many, many hats and are doing many things. So I really honor the staff who are so committed to this work, and I want to see them continually supported. The students, obviously, first. But if the staff are rowing the boat and they can't row, then the students have no boat to travel in. ■

Professor Praveen Shankar, left, and Panadda Marayong watch as student Kieran Whitney runs a flight simulator at Cal State University Long Beach.

Kieran Whitney wears 3D glasses while using a flight simulator at Cal State University Long Beach.

Kieran Whitney runs a flight simulator at Cal State University Long Beach.

*Photos by Thomas R. Cordova/Long Beach Business Journal*

# Students test air taxis of the future in virtual reality lab

**By Kate Raphael**

On the first day of the spring semester, a student stepped into Cal State Long Beach's virtual reality system and began piloting a flight simulation.

Kieran Whitney, a third-year undergraduate in computer science, donned special glasses to see the 3D panorama before him and used a joystick to operate a virtual flight, taking off from San Francisco's Embarcadero.

The simulation is part of a collaboration between the university's psychology and mechanical and aerospace engineering departments to study how humans operate "urban air mobility vehicles," akin to air taxis. About a decade ago, NASA pioneered the concept as a way to revolutionize metropolitan travel by creating on-demand air transportation, said Panadda (Nim) Marayong, one of the professors leading the project.

UAMs are the "newer version of helicopters," said Kim Vu, another professor on the project. But while helicopters are noisy, these new electric-powered vehicles will be quiet and low-emission, designed to travel to high-traffic locations (like airports) via well-developed routes (like highways).

When it starts, the service will likely be expensive, but the hope is that it will become more accessible, like Uber and Lyft, Vu said. Companies like Archer Aviation are in the process of developing and certifying their vehicles — perhaps in time for the 2028 Olympics.

While UAMs may eventually be unmanned, for now, they need human operators. How those human operators accomplish their missions, and what new technologies might help them, are what these CSULB students and faculty focus on.

Their immersive VR system, the BeachCAVE, allows the team to test features relatively quickly. They prototype new technologies in the system and study how pilots behave. For example, as Whitney piloted the virtual aircraft at low altitude through the urban environment, he had to stick to a predetermined route. Any deviation could cause him to hit a building or end up in someone's backyard. The researchers test how pilots respond to different cues, such as vibrations, to help them course correct.

They also study how pilots respond to battery-level indicators (similar to a fuel gauge), aircraft in the vicinity, and text and voice communication.

"To test this out in the real-world environment will probably take decades, years, maybe," because it would require actually building the real aircraft and interfaces, said Praveen Shankar, a professor on the project. In the VR lab, "we can probably do it in a few months," he said.

The interdisciplinary team merges different fields and skillsets. Shankar and Marayong, both engineers, help build the system, creating a VR experience as realistic to an aircraft as possible and adding technologies that alert pilots. Computer science students, like Whitney, help program the system. And Vu and her colleague Tom Strybel, in the psychology department, examine how flight operators interact with all these variables.

For students like Whitney, who was recruited to the team when a classmate discovered his knack for programming video games, the project offers a chance to work collaboratively and shape the direction of the research. "I've not been in an environment like that where I can have a voice on a big project," Whitney said as he piloted the aircraft across the San Francisco Bay, navigating above car traffic on the iconic Bay Bridge.

The project began close to a decade ago, and some of the graphics look outdated. But Shankar said the team will soon upgrade their software and integrate Google Maps to achieve more realistic landscapes, including for the Los Angeles region.

Whitney navigated gracefully, avoiding a nearby commercial plane before attempting a glideslope landing, descending toward the landing pad, or vertiport, in Oakland. ■

# A new California law requires a working fridge in all apartments

By Nadia Lathan, CalMatters

*This story was originally published by CalMatters. Sign up for their newsletters at CalMatters.org.*

Fridge-less apartments dotting the pricey California rental market will soon be a head-scratching relic.

Beginning Jan. 1, landlords will be required to provide all apartments with a working stove and refrigerator thanks to a new state law.

It marks the end of an unusual, decades-long phenomenon mostly in the Los Angeles area where some tenants have had to buy their own appliances after signing a lease.

The law, Assembly Bill 628, took effect this year, and of the numerous housing reform measures passed by the Legislature in 2025, is one of the more unusual ones.

"A working stove and a refrigerator are not luxuries," Assemblymember Tina McKinnor, a Democrat from Inglewood, said in a statement earlier this year after she introduced the bill. "They are a necessary part of modern life."

California has the fewest available apartments with refrigerators in the country, according to a 2022 report from the Los Angeles Times that was cited in the bill proposal. There is not a clear reason why, and the mysterious trend is largely region-locked to Los Angeles and Orange counties.

Most tenants don't have to buy their own bulky appliances. But California law previously required only plumbing, heat and certain other utilities be available. Apartments without the staple appliances will now be illegal unless they are part of housing with communal kitchens, single-room occupancy units or hotels.

Tenant rights groups say the law will help reduce housing costs for low-income residents who have to pay for a refrigerator — which can easily run in the hundreds of dollars — in addition to the first month's rent and a deposit before moving in.

"To have an added cost of trying to buy a refrigerator and a stove is really economically unfeasible for many tenants," said Larry Gross, executive director of the Los Angeles housing advocacy group Coalition for Economic Survival.

Realtor groups have said it will spur burdensome litigation for mom-and-pop landlords.

The requirement "will lead to heavier burdens on the courts and a dramatic reduction in the state's availability of rental housing supply," Bernice Creager, a lobbyist for the California Association of Realtors, said at a Senate judiciary committee hearing earlier this year.

Enforcement will be up to local governments. In Los Angeles, residents will be able to file a complaint with the city's housing department if a landlord refuses to provide cooking and refrigerated storage appliances.

Tenants can still bring their own refrigerator and stove if they please, but they will be on the hook for maintenance if they do. ■

*Courtesy of Anduril*

One of Anduril's semi-autonomous drones sits in a hangar. The YFQ-44A, known as Fury, was developed for the U.S. Air Force.

# Drone maker Anduril announces $1 billion expansion in Long Beach

By John Donegan

Anduril Industries, the U.S. drone-maker based in Costa Mesa, announced in January its plan to open a large-scale business campus in Long Beach and Lakewood.

In a release, the company said it is building a 1.1 million-square-foot facility for research and development at Douglas Park, a business complex north of the airport. Its headquarters will remain in Costa Mesa.

Construction will commence this year, with the first building expected to be completed by the end of next year, according to the Los Angeles Times. The land is leased by real estate developer Sare Regis Group, the Times reported, which oversaw the buildout of aerospace company Rocket Lab's headquarters nearby.

Neither Anduril nor the brokers for the sale immediately disclosed the price of the land. A spokesperson said construction will cost "in the hundreds of millions."

The campus will include six buildings that total 750,000 square feet of office space. There will be another 435,000 square feet meant for research and development. According to the city's chamber of commerce, the investment is worth more than a billion dollars.

It will bring 5,500 new jobs to the city — software developers, flight-test teams and research specialists — and thousands more hours of temporary work needed for construction. There will be opportunities, a spokesperson said, for workforce programs with the city school district and two local colleges.

The company, which makes surveillance drones and military AI software for the Pentagon, is valued at more than $30 billion and ended 2025 with 7,000 employees.

It announced earlier in January that it was awarded a $23.9 million contract to develop more than 600 weaponized drones for the U.S. Marine Corps. In 2024, it secured a deal to jointly bid on government contracts with Palantir Technologies as the Pentagon aims to cut costs.

It was co-founded by Palmer Luckey, a former Cal State Long Beach student who later invented the virtual reality headset Oculus Rift.

Neither Anduril nor the brokers for the sale immediately disclosed the purchase price of the land or the expected cost to build.

It becomes the latest on a growing list of major firms to move their operations to the city.

Pentland Brands, which includes the swimwear brand Speedo, announced during the 2026 State of the City address earlier this month that it will move its North American headquarters from Cypress to Long Beach.

Mayor Rex Richardson, who delivered the address, said this move was part of a renewed effort to improve the image and tax base of the city through a variety of programs designed to lure business and keep it here.

The mayor shaped the address around the city's economy, but also job growth, promising 4,000 new openings around the city by 2028.

In a release, he characterized Anduril's expansion as a "major vote of confidence" in the city and state's embrace of advanced manufacturing and aerospace companies.

"Today, the next generation of companies is choosing to build and hire here again," he wrote.

Anduril said the main reason for the move was the city's location — close to Hawthorne and Torrance and 90 minutes from its test site in Capistrano — as well as its history in U.S. defense and manufacturing, and the existing portfolio of aerospace startups situated around the city airport, coined as "Space Beach."

"That combination of history, talent, and industrial infrastructure makes Long Beach a natural place for Anduril to continue scaling its operations," the company wrote. ■


Mayor Rex Richardson addresses the crowd at the groundbreaking for the Long Beach Amphitheater on Wednesday, Jan. 14, 2026. *Jacob Sisneros/Long Beach Business Journal*

# Construction begins on Long Beach Amphitheater, with concerts promised in June

**By Jacob Sisneros**

Crews broke ground Jan. 14 on the Long Beach Amphitheater, the city's $21.3 million outdoor entertainment venue set to open this summer.

The temporary venue is set to run for an initial 10-year period while the city considers a permanent plan. It's become a major piece of Mayor Rex Richardson's vision to use industries like tourism and entertainment to replace declining oil revenue that has traditionally bolstered the city's budget.

He also hopes it solidifies Long Beach's place as a music destination. During his speech at the groundbreaking, Richardson recalled attending his first concert at age 16 and later seeing Prince and B.B. King perform.

"Now, we get to have those moments right here in Long Beach," Richardson said.

Long Beach Amphitheater will have 11,000 seats with grandstands at 36 feet high, facing a 51-foot high stage backdroped by the city's skyline.

Planners estimate the venue will host more than 300,000 people across more than 100 shows in its first few years.

Construction has already begun. Supplies began arriving in December, Richardson said in an interview after the groundbreaking.

Originally promised to open in fall 2025, an inaugural show is now set for June 6, with a performer still to be announced.

The venue initially had a $14 million price tag, but that's grown to $21.3 million.

A rendering of the Long Beach Amphitheater *Courtesy Legends/ASM Global*

That money was needed, city officials said, to offset increased construction and labor costs, add sustainability features, add accommodations for public transit and deliver a more "premium venue" with upgraded seating and a VIP lounge.

The increased cost will also pay for two more screens on stage.

The venue's location, tucked on a small piece of land on a peninsula next to the Queen Mary, has the potential to cause traffic and parking headaches. Richardson said that will be assuaged by a bevy of options outside of driving, including a water taxi, shuttle, rideshares and even a helicopter.

"We have to think about this less as, 'How do I get my car right there?'" Richardson said.

At last week's City Council meeting, Richardson called the Long Beach Amphitheater a "low-hanging fruit revenue opportunity" for the city.

Conservative projections show that the venue should pay for itself within eight years, according to the city's Economic Development Department, leaving room for a projected $7.4 million in profit during its final two years of operation.

At his State of the City address, Richardson noted the venue has already secured $11 million in private sponsorships.

Long Beach is paying the massive venue-management company Legends/ASM Global to run the amphitheater. Their contract includes a $15,000 monthly fee for consulting work until it opens and a $300,000 annual fee thereafter. They also get an 18% commision on the sale of naming rights and an opportunity to make money on concessions.

At the groundbreaking, Dan Hoffend, the company's executive vice president of convention centers, said the venue will not only host "big bands" but will also create opportunities for musicians looking to launch their careers.

"Genres of music were created and discovered here in Long Beach," Hoffend said.

Homegrown bands include Sublime, Tijuana Panthers and War, along with rappers Snoop Dogg, Warren G and the late Nate Dogg.

"This is really big," said Kelvin Anderson, founder of the renowned record shop VIP Records. "This is the city of art, music and entertainment, so I'm all in on it."

Anderson said he hopes to have a replica VIP Records sign installed at the venue and wants to host festivals with funk and soul music acts.

At the groundbreaking, Port of Long Beach CEO Noel Hacegaba said that the port has a band called "The TEUs" (the standard unit of measurement for cargo containers) that is lining up to play.

"If you need somebody to break this amphitheater in for free, we'll be happy to be the opening act to the opening act to the opening act to Sublime," he joked. ■

NEWS

# Slowing down for community, creative and culture:

## A conversation with Intertrend Communications founder Julia Huang

By Melissa Evans

Thomas R. Cordova/Long Beach Business Journal

Intertrend CEO Julia Huang (left) with colleagues Michael Vitug and Tanya Raukko

Intertrend once sat nine floors above downtown Long Beach.

The advertising firm moved to street level a decade ago, changing how it saw the city and its role within it.

The company's clientele is mostly faraway Fortune 500 executives who rarely visit, yet it renovated a dilapidated street-level building on Broadway — once assessed at negative value.

The reason was to plant deeper roots in Long Beach and help create the sense of belonging that a home should provide.

"Creativity doesn't live just within our four walls," founder Julia Huang said in a recent interview. "It lives outside our walls."

Intertrend hosts regular events and has facilitated collaborations among students, local businesses and artists.

Together, the move and the work reflect Huang's belief that culture and community can't be understood from a perch looking down.

I recently sat down with Huang as downtown continues to grow vertically, and the city prepares for the world's attention during the 2028 Olympic Games, both of which raise a perennial question for Long Beach: What is its identity?

**Know thyself**

Huang's perspective is unique: Born and raised in Taiwan, she came to the United States, earned a graduate degree and worked in New York and Los Angeles corporate settings before founding Intertrend in 1991.

She is no longer an outsider but can still see the city from that perspective.

Huang knows that Long Beach is a proud place and recoils from others "telling it what to do." But what it is or wants is largely dependent on who you ask.

That presents challenges as downtown fills quickly with new residents while businesses continue to struggle with limited foot traffic. Beyond downtown, new tech and aerospace firms have occupied office space by the acre near the airport — while at the same time, the city's legacy associations with West Coast rap artists like Snoop Dogg and Warren G are as relevant as ever.

The city's complex ecosystem includes a collection of "communities" — whether it be City Hall, the tourism sector, musicians and artists or individual proprietors and residents — that tend to exist in parallel, not in conversation, Huang said, leading to a very fragmented identity.

**The perils of speed**

Society today moves fast, and attention — the core business of Intertrend — has become elusive.

Huang, a member of the Boomer generation, admits she struggles at times with the pace and style

***Huang*** *page 15*

# Longtime CEO of Long Beach Grand Prix will step down in July

By John Donegan

Jim Michaelian, who has run the annual Grand Prix of Long Beach race since 2001, said on Jan. 15 that he will retire from his role as chief executive in July — perhaps the biggest change announced since the race came under new ownership.

The race's organization said in a statement that Jim Liaw, a longtime motorsports administrator and enthusiast, will become the new president and CEO. Liaw will assume a temporary title of general manager in February, ahead of the 2026 race, before the formal transition in July.

Michaelian, 82, first joined the Grand Prix Association in 1975 as a controller and later as chief operating officer. He did not offer a specific reason for his retirement, saying in a statement that, following the race's 50th anniversary, it was "the right time to make this transition."

After his departure, Michaelian will assume a new role at Penske Entertainment, which purchased the race series from its longtime owner, Gerald Forsythe, in 2024.

Penske Entertainment is contracted to run the Long Beach race through at least 2028.

In his past, Michaelian was a race car driver himself, with a 25-year career that put him on tracks in Le Mans, France; Daytona, Fla.; and Nürburgring in Germany.

In a statement, he called the Grand Prix role "the privilege of a lifetime."

"This event and this community mean a great deal to me, and I'm proud

***Michaelian*** *page 13*

Thomas R. Cordova/Long Beach Business Journal

Grand Prix Association of Long Beach President and CEO Jim Michaelian and Indy car driver Oriol Servia stand on the racetrack ahead of the 2022 Acura Grand Prix of Long Beach in Long Beach, Thursday, Feb. 17, 2022.

## Degree *from page 6*

earned her associate's at LBCC in 2019 and became a clerk at Mark Twain Library in Central Long Beach but put further education on hold. Now, "finally at a point" of studying to become a librarian, she is considering LBCC's bachelor's.

Lee Douglas, LBCC vice president of academic affairs, said the college plans to strengthen the hands-on training library students complete through internships, as well as explore partnerships with other institutions for further education, some of which are materializing.

Anthony Chow, director of SJSU's School of Information, has proposed that credits earned through LBCC's bachelor's program count toward SJSU's master's in library science.

"There is a long-standing controversy in the field about whether professional librarians need a master's degree, and the answer is yes," said Chow, who leads the California Library Association. A bachelor's shouldn't replace a master's in library science, because that would dilute salaries and expertise, Chow said. Rather, LBCC's program will create a pipeline for librarians and information experts. ■

## Michaelian *from page 12*

of what our team has built together," Michaelian said. "For 50 years, I have been given the unique opportunity to merge my passion for motorsports with involvement with the longest-running street race in America, which has been a distinct privilege."

Starting this summer, the Grand Prix will be run by Liaw, a businessman who in 2003 co-founded Formula Drift, an international drifting competition. He's also served on several local and regional boards related to sports and tourism.

Since 2021, he has served as general manager of Performance Racing Industry, a pro-racing business publication that also hosts a long-running motorsports trade show in Indianapolis.

According to Liaw, the city's grand prix race was the first he ever witnessed in person.

"It helped spark a lifelong connection to motorsports," he said in a statement. "Southern California has been home since I was six, so it's truly an honor to represent Long Beach and the region while leading such a special event."

The 2026 Acura Grand Prix of Long Beach will take place April 17 to 19. ■



## Attendance *from page 7*

new state law, which took effect in January, removes jail time and fines for parents of truant students.

Susan Scott, a first-grade teacher at Fremont Elementary, described what she called a "monumental shift" after the pandemic: "The public's mind is that it doesn't matter if you're at school every day," she said.

Teachers are under enormous pressure to get kids in school, but that pressure is "in the wrong place," said Scott. Teachers have little control over whether kids attend, Scott said, yet their pay and resources are affected as a result of tightening budgets. In California, schools receive a cost-of-living adjustment from the state, but the state withholds some money when attendance is below 100%. "The whole funding mechanism needs to be changed," Scott said.

In December, the Public Policy Institute of California published a report examining potential updates to the state's school funding formula. The report's authors found that allocating funds by enrollment rather than attendance would benefit high-need districts.

That same month, superintendents of eight major urban California school districts (including Long Beach Unified) sent a letter to Gov. Gavin Newsom urging him to increase funding to public education. The letter expressed concerns over decreasing enrollment, disruptions from immigration raids, federal funding cuts and economic hardship, which the superintendents said their districts are feeling acutely.

Yet the state's nonpartisan policy advisor, the Legislative Analyst's Office, recommended continuing to allocate funds based on attendance.

At the local level, improving attendance could recover state money the district "leaves on the table" due to low numbers, teachers union president Gerry Morrison said. In its recently ratified contract, the union created an attendance committee with the district, whose response to absences has been inadequate, Morrison said. He proposed collaborating with city agencies to encourage students to show up. ■

*Courtesy the city of Long Beach*

This rendering shows the latest plans for the Belmont Pool complex.

# New parking meters may save plan to build new Belmont Pool

**By John Donegan**

After years of setbacks and delays, the Long Beach City Council on Jan. 20 approved a $105 million spending plan to build a new aquatics center on the sands of Belmont Shore.

The plan, which was approved unanimously, relies on future approvals for the city to borrow $24.5 million in bonds that would be paid back in large part by new parking meters at 1,800 public spaces around the Alamitos Bay Marina.

Construction is expected to start this summer and finish by spring 2028. It includes a 50-meter Olympic pool, with bleachers, movable bulkhead and four springboards; a shallow therapy and learning pool; spray zones; and a multiuse building with locker rooms, offices and changing areas. The facility will replace the temporary Belmont Plaza Pool, installed after the prior pool was deemed seismically unsafe in 2013.

The temporary pool is planned to remain at least through construction. Afterward, the city will negotiate with the California Coastal Commission on whether to close it.

Most of the project's budget — $77 million — is funded with cash in Long Beach's Tidelands Fund, which mostly relies on oil revenue. But a $28 million hole in the budget is forcing the city to patch together sponsorship revenue, small-time grants and — crucially — a $24.5 million bond to get it across the finish line.

The formal action to issue debt would come back for council approval in June before its sale in July. Officials say they will schedule public hearings to solicit feedback.

To help pay back that debt, the city plans to start charging for parking at 1,800 spaces around the Alamitos Bay Marina that are currently free. If at least a fifth of those spaces — charged at $2 an hour — are filled at any given time, the meters would generate $3 million annually.

Long Beach has proposed charging for those spaces before, saying it's rare to find free beachfront parking in a city of its size. But the idea, last studied in 2022, was rejected by the city marine commission the same year over concerns it would unfairly tax waterside patrons.

Even with City Council backing, it's not a certainty. Parking meters will require the city to apply for a permit from the Coastal Commission.

The decision, in large part, marks the beginning of the end for the city's 13-year wait for a new pool.

The facility, dubbed the Belmont Aquatics Center, has

***Pool*** *page 15*


*Thomas R. Cordova/Long Beach Business Journal*

Voters in line outside the Billie Jean King Main Library in Long Beach, Tuesday, Nov. 5, 2024

# Long Beach will not ask voters to raise taxes following dismal polling

**By John Donegan**

Long Beach voters will not be asked to approve a property tax hike in November to pay for city services, after a city-commissioned poll found they are likely to oppose it.

The poll, obtained by the Long Beach Post through a public records request, introduced the idea of a parcel tax that levies 8 cents per square foot of land, equivalent to $630 more a year for the average Long Beach homeowner. The new tax would have required the approval of two-thirds of Long Beach voters.

Officials hoped it would bring in $200 million per year, though they later realized it would need to be triple the figure they polled on, closer to $1,800 for the average homeowner, to collect that amount.

Responses from 871 residents — through telephone calls, or online surveys from Oct. 14 to 22 — found that 80% said it is not the right time to raise taxes, even if the money is needed to cover services — street repairs, police and fire — that might otherwise be lost.

It's a reversal of public confidence from 18 months ago, when a majority of Long Beach voters agreed to local and county taxes meant to pay for public safety, curb homelessness and stem a growing mental health crisis. Now, respondents said their own economic well-being — including cost of living, inflation and rising prices — is a more pressing issue than crime and on par with homelessness.

FM3 Research, which ran the poll, said voters appeared to be in a "highly pessimistic mood." Many "hold a negative view of their city, most think the economy is getting worse, and almost half feel their own personal finances have deteriorated in the past year."

Of those surveyed, 47% said Long Beach was headed in the wrong direction; 48% said their own financial situations had worsened, and 53% said waste and mismanagement by city government was an extremely or very serious problem.

Their broader outlook was even worse, with 51% saying the state was on the wrong track and 71% saying the same about the nation. A majority of Black voters, however, held a favorable view of the city's direction, while whites, Latinos and Asians or Pacific Islanders saw it in a negative light.

The poll's margin of error was 3.5 percentage points.

Mayor Rex Richardson blamed national rhetoric for driving down trust in all levels of government, regardless of who runs it.

"When you have folks at the very top of government who question public health and question data," Richardson said. "What do you really have to count on if we can't trust facts and data and common sense anymore?"

He said it's "unfortunate that the spirit of the times affects our ability to keep people safe."

Even on a nonpartisan local measure, the poll showed sharp political divisions, with 77% of Republicans opposed to the property tax increase compared to 32% of Democrats. Fifty-three percent of independents were also opposed.

This comes as Richardson and city management are under mounting pressure to right Long Beach's finances. The city faces a $60 million structural shortfall, meaning it's expected to face a deficit each consecutive year, including $40 million this year. Historically crucial oil revenues are in steady decline, and federal cuts have axed some city health programs.

After exhausting its remaining carryover funds from COVID-19 relief programs, the city has about $13 million in operating reserves, a couple of million in the city's "rainy day fund" and about $60 million in emergency reserves.

Without new monies, City Manager Tom Modica said cuts are likely in the coming fiscal year. Unable to comment on specifics, he said the city will have a better idea by April.

Voters appeared to be aware of the budget problems. Most agreed the city needs more

***Taxes*** *page 15*

## Taxes *from page 14*

revenue to avoid layoffs or an end to programs, with many supporting subsidizing the construction of affordable housing, building homeless shelters, stabilizing the city Health Department and maintaining public parks and libraries.

In the long run, however, most saw higher taxes as a greater evil than further reductions in city services, with more than half saying they already pay too much.

Homeowners, a crucial voting bloc that represents an outsized share of the local electorate despite being a minority of the population, opposed the tax at 58%. Sixty-four percent of renters supported it. The city's last attempt to raise property taxes in 2008 also failed with 52.8% of the vote.

The results indicate the magnitude of the challenge that leaders face in framing solutions to such complex problems that can win broad public and political support while not hurting constituents' pocketbooks.

Richardson believes he's built an agenda that threads that needle, citing an 84% increase in homeless shelters, speedier hiring of public employees and an expanded police academy with a record number of recruits.

"You have to show that you can deliver results," Richardson said. "Every time we break ground on a project, every time we deliver a new street … it rebuilds a little bit of hope that government works and can work." ■

## Pool *from page 14*

gone through multiple revisions in the past decade, with prices ranging between $60 million and $145 million. Originally envisioned as a $119 million domed natatorium and surrounding campus, the project has been pared down by unfeasible costs, declining oil revenues, environmental-related legal challenges and mandates by the Coastal Commission.

Before even breaking ground, the project has cost $23.2 million, largely for designs, redesigns, studies and permitting, including work from a dozen different consultants.

Further delays arrived last May when construction bids ran over budget — each coming in at around $60 million — and were rejected. The city restarted the bidding process and reviewed three new offers in October. In a second round last fall, the city fielded three more bids, with the lowest coming in at $54.3 million for construction. (Other costs in the $105 million budget include ongoing maintenance and programming at the pool.)

Acknowledging he previously took issue with the project, Mayor Rex Richardson sought to downplay talk of a bond measure, saying that the timing and method of funding were appropriate to meet the city's 2028 deadline of having a photo-worthy asset ahead of the Olympic Games.

"As mayor, sometimes you inherit projects that are not perfect," Richardson said. "And you have to make a decision: Are you going to move forward and find a way or are you going to pass the buck onto the next generation or say that it's not going to happen?"

During the city presentation, officials characterized issuing debt as a common strategy to fund long-term capital projects. Kevin Riper, the city's financial director, said in an email on Tuesday that bonds have been used to pay for improvements to the city convention center and construction of Fire Station 9.

Barring a "nuclear holocaust," tsunami, earthquake or "economic catastrophe," Riper said he cannot see anything stopping the city from successfully selling the bonds this summer.

"In all four cases, Long Beach residents and businesses will have much greater worries than financing the Belmont Pool," he wrote.

One criticism that's dogged the project since its inception, and continued Tuesday, is that a pool would be better suited in inland areas of the city, where underserved communities need access to the water.

Richardson pushed back on this, saying talks are underway to build a pool at Ramona Park in North Long Beach as part of the city's next major round of infrastructure projects. It would cost between $25 million and $32 million. ■

## Huang *from page 12*

of this moment. "30 to 35 years ago, you could pause and think," she said.

But culture, she said, must be created intentionally, and that requires thinking, listening, talking — all of which take time.

Without that, she fears Long Beach risks becoming a city of landlords, with creators, talent and cultural energy being centered outside its boundaries.

"I meet the most interesting Long Beach residents outside of Long Beach," Huang said — at galas in West Hollywood, museums in Los Angeles, or tours in foreign countries. "Why is that? I cannot understand that."

The challenge for the city, she said, is adapting fast enough to survive while slowing down enough to care for the people who live here.

That Long Beach can accommodate so many versions of itself is a beautiful asset, she said. "We also need to make sure there is a north star." ■



# Internships and Scholarships

Applications for the Port of Long Beach's high school summer internships and scholarships are open through Feb. 20. If you're interested in a career in trade or a related field, apply at ***polb.com/education***.

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