

# Black Leadership in the New City

The Role and Vision of Black Leaders in Long Beach, 1970-2024

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*“Our city was basically a town that for generations ignored the rights of anyone that was not white males.” -- Doris Topsy-Elvord 1996*

Something unprecedented is happening in Long Beach. Blacks and other historically marginalized groups are experiencing a dramatic rise in political influence.

You might say it's a new city, quite different from the old version described above by Doris Topsy-Elvord—the first African American city councilwoman—in a 1996 speech. Despite its past, Long Beach has evolved into a more inclusive city, increasing diversity amongst city government, cultures, and institutions. Gradually and with persistence, the new city has taken shape since the 1970s. And Black leadership in Long Beach has been a major catalyst for much of that change.

Today Long Beach is a town of many historical firsts: Rex Richardson is the first African American mayor and the first from North Long Beach, Dennis Buchanan is the first African American to head the Long Beach Fire Department, Alison King is the first African American and first Black woman to head the Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services, and Cynthia Guidry, also an African American woman, is head of the Long Beach Airport. Attorney Michele Dobson is the first Black person to lead the Long Beach Rotary club. Reggie Harrison is Director of the City of Long Beach Department of Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Communications. Al Austin and Dr. Joni Ricks-Oddie are the two African Americans on the nine-member Long Beach City Council, representing districts eight and nine respectively. And when Austin is termed out later this year, he will be replaced on Dec. 17, 2024 by Tunua Thrash-Ntuk.

There are more Blacks on city boards and commissions than at any time in Long Beach history. In addition, many churches, community groups and organization that are vital to the city are directed by prominent Black leaders.

Historically, defining power in Long Beach was an easy proposition: white men had it and they used it to control everyone else. Blacks endured segregation and dehumanization in the Jim Crow South, and migrated here from such states as Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi westward in search of opportunity, only to find Long Beach had its own brand of discrimination and injustice. In response, they strategized, organized, mobilized and emphasized the need for change, understanding as did 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionist Frederick Douglass, that power yields nothing without first a demand.

Blacks have existed in Long Beach for more than a century, almost from its beginning. The city was first incorporated on February 10, 1888, and reincorporated on December 3, 1897. Blacks were drawn here for any combination of reasons; but mostly in search of opportunity and freedom. There are accounts of Blacks organizing churches as early as 1904 (Day and Tucker, 2007: p.1). And for much of that early history, Blacks in Long Beach were invisible to the more populous and dominant white society, segregated in an area often called Midtown, but perhaps more widely known as the Central Area. From the earliest days, Black leaders have envisioned a city where their people would enjoy full equality and not be seen or treated as second-class citizens.

The 1900 US Census counted 100 Blacks out of a city with a total population of 17,809 (about the seating capacity of New York City's Madison Square Garden). The coming decades would see a booming growth spurt in the total population; 55,593 in 1920, and 142,032 in 1930. But the Black population remained relatively small during this period; 142 Blacks in 1920; 353, in 1930; their living area began expanding from 10<sup>th</sup> to Hill, from Locust to Cherry (Day and Tucker, p. 223).

Claudine Burnett's African Americans in Long Beach and Southern California: A History discusses Black suffering and triumphs against racial discrimination in great depth. For instance, in a chapter titled "A New Century," she provides an early account of Blacks appealing for redress against a public indignity. The account was originally recorded in 1919, in the *Long Beach Press*, on June 27, with the headline, "Colored men protest Pike game." It reports that Elijah P. Lane, a Black man, then living at 506 Locust Avenue, appeared before the city's governing body to ask them to abolish and prohibit a game at the Pike amusement park, called "Drowning the Nigger" as "objectionable to Negroes of this city.(Burnett, pp. 65-66)" The article said, "the object of the game was to precipitate a Black person into a tank of water by striking a target with a baseball." The response to Lane's appeal was tepid. Mayor William T. Lisenby found the use of the N-word objectionable, but City Attorney George Hoodenpyl claimed he could find no legal method to prohibit the game (Day and Tucker, p. 14).

Again, the disparaging Pike incident happened in the summer of 1919, historically known as the "Red Summer," due to the spilling of Black blood by white mobs in approximately 25 cities, resulting in 97 lynchings, across the United States, in the wake of World War I and the Great Migration (Franklin, 1967, pp. 481-482). It is

unknown whether Lane knew about the Red Summer incidents when he made his appeal, but the atrocities did not bypass California. An incident flared in San Francisco between Black soldiers and white policemen three days after Lane's appeal.

With the onset of WWII, a few Black families moved into the Westside, but the Black mass remained in the Central Area, enclosed by an invisible barrier. When Blacks tried to move outside the two areas, their efforts were met with hostility and consternation. Housing covenants were strongly enforced preventing white homeowners from renting or selling to Blacks.

"When we were coming along, it was the Whites who had all the power," recalls Dee Andrews, who arrived in Long Beach from Ore City, Texas in 1945. "Segregation was very strong here (Murphy Ly, A., an oral history interview, April 11, 2024)." Power rested solely among white leaders of the Chamber of Commerce, the Board of Realtors, the daily newspaper, civic organizations, and politicians (Simon, 2018). More recently, power is shifting somewhat to union leaders, community organizations, community news outlets, and a strong mayor.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is the oldest civil rights organization in the country, and it gained notoriety for its efforts to fight battles outlawing lynchings, securing Black voting rights, registering and educating new voters in the South, and winning important legal cases. A Long Beach NAACP branch was formed to fight discriminatory practices here in 1940. "My wife and I were fed up with discrimination in Long Beach," (Nash, 2007). Ernest McBride started the chapter with his wife, and friends Roscoe Hayes, L.J. Jones, and Nathan Holly; the latter becoming first president, Mrs. McBride, secretary-treasurer, and Mr. McBride, field

secretary. The new branch demanded an end to unwarranted searches, the abolition of a misguided vagrancy law that unjustly targeted Black men, and false arrests by the Long Beach police. It waged battles against racism that permeated city culture: the police for harassment, the courts for excessive fines and heavy sentences, the schools for miseducation, and private businesses and corporations for unfair employment practices. It was demanding and persistent, but overall, it clung to a situational leadership style, focused on securing Black rights, and deeply rooted in moderate, middle-class and traditional American values.

Then along came the Sixties. Militant organizations appeared on the Long Beach scene, but their efforts were cut short by a number of factors. First, the NAACP model became the dominant Black leadership style. Secondly, the militant rhetoric and revolutionary nature of the new groups antagonized the white power structure, and undermined moderate Blacks. A third factor was a lack of resources and funding to sustain their activities. And, finally, many of the more outspoken Blacks were co-opted with city jobs (Nash, S. 2007).

Still, the militants made some positive changes. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) never caught on in Long Beach, but its march on City Hall in 1963, proclaiming its displeasure with the makeup of the city-sponsored Human Relations Committee, set the committee on the path towards racial integration ("City Hall picketed by CORE, racial affairs policy of Council criticized," *Press Telegram*, p.B-1, col. 4, Nov. 9, 1963). The Youth Action Movement (YAM) had a short lifespan too. YAM set its sights on inequities at local recreational facilities, namely the 19th Street Playground and the California Recreation Center or the Rec. YAM was made up of radicalized high school

and college students and street toughs from the Central Area and led by a young man named Sonny Pitt. City officials conducted a hearing at the Rec. to hear YAMs concerns and were met with angry cries of "Give us what we want, not what white people want." (Shaw, D., April 11, 1967, City agrees to Negro park demand, *Independent*, p.9). What they wanted was an expanded baseball diamond at the playground and an adequate supply of ping pong balls at the Rec (Nichols, W, personal communication, June 5, 2024). What they got was a promise of \$250,000 for expenditures at Cal Rec, including adding a 5,700-square foot social hall and air conditioning in all of its buildings, and another \$175,000 in expenditures for the playground, expanding it by 7,500 feet and adding baseball and softball diamonds. A few short years later, two city councilmen would make good on the promises. The 19th Street playground is now Martin Luther King Jr. Park, and the Rec is now the Ernest McBride Park and California Community Center. The two incidents bear attention as departures from the norm that did lead to change, but overall, the Black leadership style in Long Beach continues to favor a low-key approach to political persuasion. Still, CORE and YAM incidents bear witness to the adage that it is the squeaky wheel that gets the oil.

Blacks, young and old, moderate and militant, had been inspired by the Civil Rights Movement to challenge the status quo and by the Sixties had turned their sights towards the ballot box. In 1963, lawyer Hugh "Huey" Shepard challenged sixth district incumbent Emmet M. Sullivan, but lost. His campaign committee was chaired by Dr. Ebenezer B. Bush, the first Black dentist in Long Beach (Day and Tucker, p. 130). Although unsuccessful, Shepard's campaign set the stage for Black challenges to the political apparatus in Long Beach.

In 1969, Sullivan was challenged again, when a Black group from the Central Area demonstrated in front of his home, calling on him to step down. The group, the Central Area Neighborhood Council, was made up of several different organizations, and pressured Sullivan to resign because he had accepted a position with the Los Angeles County Civil Service Commission. The group argued that Sullivan's acceptance represented a conflict of interest with his duties as councilman. Unable to hold both posts, Sullivan resigned from the City Council. He is the last Caucasian to represent the sixth district on the city council.

Coleman's is one of those closed Long Beach restaurants that is still fondly remembered. It was located across the street from Poly High School. In its heyday, it was a renowned Southern style soul food eatery, and a place where folks gathered for special meetings. One day, a mass meeting was called and Coleman's was crammed tighter than a tin of sardines. People from all over the district had gathered to ruminate on their political future. Emmet Sullivan, who had represented the Central Area on the city council since 1960, had resigned in late 1969. Black leaders read the moment as a chance to replace the white Sullivan with one of their own. Names were blurted out and written on a blackboard. One of the first names was that of "Huey" Shepard, but he declined the nomination, perhaps still smarting from his loss to Sullivan years earlier. And William "Bill" Barnes was exhorted to add his name as a nominee, but Barnes, then a counselor at Long Beach City College, had also declined. Just then someone mentioned "Tex". The gathering nomination process set in motion an event that would change the face of the city and reshape politics in Long Beach.



"We had our finalist, (Saafir, A., personal communication, June 5, 2024)." The "finalist" was none other than James Howard Wilson, who hailed from Temple, Texas, thus Tex. He was well known in the community. He had tilled the soil with grassroots pioneer Black activists the likes of Evelyn Knight, Dale Clinton and Mary Butler. He was an early supporter of the Community Improvement League, the city's oldest anti-poverty, social service agency. Wilson won a special election on April 7, 1940, and, in so doing, made history as the first African American on the Long Beach City Council.

Interethnic politics played a large role in Wilson's election, illuminating the fact that the march to equality and diversity involve the full human spectrum. For example, pioneer activist Carmen O. Perez cut her political teeth working on the Wilson campaign, passing out flyers, knocking on doors, and soliciting support for Wilson in the Latino community (Weissman, S., 2003, Historical Society of Long Beach, You Tube). Wilson won with broad-based support, young and old, Black and white, institutions and organizations.

Wilson was re-elected to office four times in 1972, 1976, 1980 and 1984. He is a torchbearer for the current political scene. During his time in office, Wilson set in motion initiatives that reflected the politics of the poor, working class residents of his district. He is remembered for bringing housing and jobs to the area. He waged a battle to change the name of California Avenue—the spine of the historic Central Area—to honor Dr. King. Upon his death in 1986, a Wilson campaign worker praised him as an "ambassador of goodwill. (Charles, H., Wilson's pastor, friends, recall man of the people, June 13, 1986, p. A-11, cols. 1-5)." His memory lives on in Long Beach's annual Martin Luther King Parade.

Jim Wilson was followed on the council by Clarence Smith (1986), Doris Topsy-Elvord (1992), Laura Richardson (2000), and Dee Andrews (2007). And for more than 40 years, the sixth district was known as the “Black seat” on the city council. But as we shall see, that would change as Black leadership shifted from district six to districts eight and nine.

Clarence Smith was the second African American elected to the Long Beach City Council, first in a special election in the summer of 1986 following the death of Jim Wilson and re-elected to a full four-year term in 1988. Smith brought to fruition many of the initiatives first set in motion by Wilson. Like Wilson, Smith worked to expand King Park. His efforts led to a covered, permanent pool. Smith was elected by the support of Blacks, gay rights groups and downtown business interests. He fought hard to combat gang violence, crime, and drug trafficking in his district. He founded the Long Beach Central Area Association, an advocacy group within the sixth district. Smith served on the council until 1992, when he was narrowly defeated by Doris Topsy-Elvord.

Her life is full of firsts: the first African American to attend and graduate from Long Beach’s St. Anthony’s High School, the first African American woman elected to the Long Beach City Council, the first Black vice-mayor, and the first African American to serve on the Port of Long Beach Harbor Commission. She was affectionately known as “Mother Doris” for her stature as a role model, for her wise counsel and for her nurturing spirit. She, along with Wilson, Smith and Eunice Sato, the first Japanese American elected to the city council (1975) and first female mayor (1980), paved the way for today’s diverse city council. She organized the Jim Wilson Memorial BBQ

Cook-off Gospel and Blues Fest, the Herb Smith Annual Slow-Pitch Tournament, and the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Birthday Unity Parade.

Laura Richardson began her lengthy political career by first serving on the Long Beach City Council (2000 to 2006), the second Black female to do so after Doris Topsy-Elvord. She opened the first new bank in the Central Area and the first job training center in the inner city for working families. She left the council to run successfully for an open seat in the state legislature, and has had a lengthy career in state and national politics. In 2006, Richardson was a member of the California State Assembly from the 55th district, which includes Carson, Harbor City, Lakewood, Long Beach, and Wilmington. Later, she was the US representative for California's 37th congressional District (2007) following the death of Juanita Millender-McDonald. Richardson served in that seat until 2013.

Dee Andrews is one of the most famous athletes to come out of the Central Area and, along with many others helped put Poly High School on the national sports map. Elected to the Long Beach City Council in 2007, he had a 13-year political career representing the sixth district. At 83, he serves as a bridge between the old guard politics and the new. What's more, he may turn out to be the last African American elected to serve on the city council representing the Central Area's sixth district.

Launching his bid for a third term, he witnessed a changing of the guard. US representative Alan Lowenthal was leaving his congressional seat and former city mayor Robert Garcia was mulling over the idea of running to fill the vacancy. And for the first time in Long Beach political history, a Cambodian American, Suely Saro, was running for the city council, challenging Andrews' grip on the Cambodian vote. (Murphy

Ly, A., an oral history interview, April 2024). African Americans continued then as now to live in the Central Area of Long Beach but a growing number began moving from the sixth district to districts eight and nine, above Willow and towards North Long Beach.

It's important to note that Black leadership was operating at an even more local level than the city council. For years Blacks rotated one seat on the city's three major governing bodies—the city council, the school board and the community college board of trustees. Several individuals served important roles in shaping education policies and reform that deserve attention. Among them are Bobbie Smith, first elected to the Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) Board of Education in 1988, the first African American to serve on the school board, one of the largest in the US. Bobbie Smith served as board president for three separate terms. She championed school uniforms, and standards-based instruction. Before her death in 2022, she served on many community organizations, including the Long Beach Section of the National Council of Negro Women, a broad-based, volunteer organization of African American women, and the Long Beach branch of the NAACP.

Dr. Felton Williams followed Bobbie Smith on the school board in representing district two. Williams was a long-time school board member with a 16-year tenure. Presently Erik Miller is the district two representative on the school board, having been elected Nov. 3, 2020. Carl Cohn deserves mention as the LBUSD's first African American superintendent. He served from 1992-2002.

In 1978, the Long Beach City College (LBCC) District separated from the LBUSD. And from 1978 to 1993, LBCC had been governed by an all-white board of trustees. Patricia Lufland was the first African American elected to the board of trustees in 1996. Uduak-Joe Ntuk presently represents Uptown Long Beach on the LBCC trustee board He is the first African American male to serve in this capacity since the college's founding in 1927.

Of the three governing bodies, only the Long Beach City Council has more than one Black representative sitting at the table. The city council presently has two Black members from two separate districts.

In 2010, Steve Neal, now a Harbor commissioner, made history as the first African American to serve on the council from outside the Central Area, and the first to serve in North Long Beach or Uptown. "Before I ran for office up here in the north--all the Black councilmembers had come out of Central Long Beach--the sixth district. For 40 years, it's been that way. Well, since my election in 2010, the Black councilmembers have been coming from up here. (Murphy Ly, A., an oral history interview, April 9, 2024)." He attributed his success to the shift in the Black population from the Central Area to North Long Beach.

While in office, he sought to address issues that had plagued North Long Beach for a long time, failing infrastructure issues, an excessive number of liquor stores, skyrocketing foreclosures, prostitution, crime, and gang violence. In response, he encouraged liquor store reforms, spruced up Houghton Park, laid the groundwork for improvements along the Artesia Corridor, helped pass votes for the Uptown Business Improvement District, implemented the Uptown Jazz Festival, a premier summer event

comparable to popular music concerts held downtown; used public forums to arouse public sentiment, and created neighborhood associations. Dr. Ricks-Oddie, the present ninth district councilwoman, is a product of one such neighborhood association.

In 2012, Al Austin was elected councilmember in the neighboring eighth district. The two men, along with Rex Richardson, are more strongly tied to unions and less so to civil rights organizations than the old guard that Wilson, Smith, and Topsy-Elvord had been in the past. What they do share in common with the forementioned is that they are respectable and non-threatening, and therefore worthy of support from a broad segment of the city, while remaining true to their African American roots.

Austin became the second Black person to serve on the city council not from the sixth district. Skeptics scoffed at Neal's campaign for office in the eighth District, which includes middle-class Los Cerritos and affluent Virginia Country Club, but he won over a formidable candidate in Lillian Kawasaki. With Austin's election to the council in 2012, there were for the first time three Black men on the nine-member city council at the same time, Andrews, Neal and Austin, from three different districts.

Before he termed out of office, he helped make North Long Beach as relevant as more esteemed areas of the city, brought in dozens of new businesses including a Trader Joe's at San Antonio and Long Beach, made improvements to De Forest Park and restored the adjacent Wetlands, cast a vote for the Uptown Business District, made improvements along the Atlantic Corridor, and made investments in the infrastructure.

In 2014, Rex Richardson was elected to the city council, replacing his former boss, Steve Neal, in the North Long Beach ninth district. As a councilman, he helped lead what has become known as the Uptown Renaissance (Bartelotto, J. and Roa, V., an oral history interview, March 3, 2024). He acknowledges he did not do it alone, pointing out that it started with his predecessor, and he picked up where Neal left off. Part of the revitalization of North Long Beach is the establishment of the Michelle Obama Neighborhood Library on Atlantic at South Street. Richardson inaugurated the Doris Topsy-Elvord Center at Houghton Park, and championed the Uptown Open Space Plan. Along with Neal, Austin, and former Mayor Robert Garcia, he advocated for term limits, redistricting, and realignment in order to transform public policies and practices in Long Beach.

He has served twice as vice-mayor. He was elected the 29<sup>th</sup> mayor of Long Beach in 2022, the first Black mayor and the first from North Long Beach. Many of his initiatives concern improving the lot of the underserved and underrepresented. Richardson has moved to create a framework for racial reconciliation and requested the city manager's office to issue a public statement acknowledging the existence of racism in Long Beach. Many of his initiatives stem from public conversations on race started by the city council following the May 25, 2020, death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis, Minnesota police.

As mayor, Richardson has pushed for the passage of a measure to create a Police Oversight Commission with the power to review major use of force incidents, and make recommendations on department operations, policies, procedures, and training. He also established the first commission on women and girls.

For most of its history, Long Beach has been governed by white men. But that has changed recently. Today the city's three major governing bodies—the city council, the Board of Education, and the LBCC board of trustees--are made up of people of color and women. It wasn't possible before 1970. Since, there has been an increase in visibility and involvement of people of color, and other marginalized communities, within the Long Beach and its politics. Long Beach is evolving into a new city. Black and other leaders here have helped lay the foundation.

In her 1996 speech, Topsy-Elvord observed: "I don't know of any other area of the world, the size of our city, that has as much cultural diversity as we have. This phenomenon is a great opportunity, or it could be a disastrous one. That, my friends, is up to all of us (Topsy-Elvord, "Justice in the New City," First Congregational Church, March 3, 1996)."



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