

“From the Margins to the Mainstream: New Leadership and the Uptown Renaissance in North
Long Beach ”

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Represented At Last!: The Story of Long Beach’s Transformation in Politics and People

Historical Society of Long Beach

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As of 2023, Long Beach ranks as the 43rd largest city by population in the United States and 7th in the state of California. As the city grows in population and prominence, it is essential to reflect on the local history and recognize how the city as a whole grew in the twentieth century. In the early 1920s Long Beach purchased the area now known as North Long Beach, which doubled the size of the city and contributed to its rise in popularity in Southern California. North Long Beach is located just north of the Bixby Knolls neighborhood, and borders Carson, Compton, Paramount, and Lakewood. The 50,000 resident population in North Long Beach alone rivals the populations of surrounding cities such as Paramount. This section of the city contains key landmarks, including Houghton Park and the Michelle Obama Neighborhood Library. North Long Beach has also emerged as a hub of political leadership and activism in recent years. However, despite its political and cultural contributions, it has often felt disconnected from the rest of Long Beach. Some perceptions label the neighborhood as dangerous due to its proximity to Compton, and the infrastructure has faced criticism. The city and community at large has made substantial strides in improvement, including upgrades to the Uptown Business District and Artesia Boulevard. North Long Beach's history of exclusion laid the groundwork for a significant political shift in the mid-2000s, marked by a new generation of leaders that prioritized inclusivity, community engagement, and economic development. These efforts led to North Long Beach's transformation into an up-and-coming neighborhood that strives for representation and integration within the broader Long Beach community.

Long Beach Expands

North Long Beach has officially been a part of the city for a century, but the territory did not originally belong to Long Beach. Long Beach was incorporated as a city in February of 1888

and at that time it encompassed only fourteen square miles. Jotham Bixby owned land in Rancho Los Cerritos, north of the city, where the city's founder William Willmore planned a farming community. In the nineteenth century, this tract of land and other northern plots consisted of small farms and dairies.¹ Towards the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, many of these northern lands became part of Virginia City, a small agricultural and oil town.

As Long Beach grew in population the city manager Charles H. Windham sought more land and resources – including waterways and oil – to support the expanding city. City officials also faced pressures to maintain Long Beach's facilities for its large population, and the city commissioners recognized that expanding the city would help alleviate the strain. While Windham rejected numerous offers from local landowners, he eagerly accepted the land in Virginia City and what is now Signal Hill. He saw that these areas, with their booming oil economies, could help distribute Long Beach's growing population.² In the early 1920s, Windham formed an annexation committee within the Chamber of Commerce to incorporate North Long Beach and other areas such as Alamitos Bay into the city. In 1923, when Long Beach annexed the northern territory, North Long Beach extended from Willow Street through California Heights and included Los Cerritos and Virginia Farms. The annexed area totaled fourteen square miles, doubling the size of the city. The sales of the territories were finalized in May and June of 1924. Letters from Windham's office to city attorney Bruce Mason reveal that the city paid \$174,586.50 for the plots of land. The city got a good deal, as the landowning Houghton family donated the area that became Houghton Park.³ One hundred years later, North

¹ Loretta Berber, "A Step Back in Time," *Historical Society of Long Beach Journal*, 1990, 15, 5, 31; Mark Houghton, "Talk Delivered to North Long Beach Realty Club," September 8, 1977.

² *Press-Telegram*, January 21, 1982; Orville B. Curtis, "The Long Beach Story," 8; Houghton, "Talk Delivered to North Long Beach Realty Club," Daryl Kelley, "I still can't think of a place I'd rather be," *Press-Telegram*, c. 1980s.

³ Houghton, "Talk Delivered to North Long Beach Realty Club"; C. H. Windham to Bruce Mason, June 27, 1924.

Long Beach is thriving with vibrant community engagement and political activism, solidifying its integral role in the city.

North Long Beach in the Mid-Twentieth Century

North Long Beach saw significant development in the twentieth century after its annexation by city manager Charles Windham and the Long Beach Chamber of Commerce. The 1940s marked a period of rapid growth for the area. Ken McCafferty of the *Long Beach Tribune*, a newspaper specifically published for the North Long Beach community, reported in 1941 that North Long Beach became a hub for manufacturing jobs as World War II raged on in Europe and the Pacific. The demand for labor in the shipbuilding and aircraft industries attracted many blue collar workers to North Long Beach. McCafferty joked that “[a] study of license plates and defense industry payrolls seems to indicate that Long Beach, much referred to as the capital of Iowa, is inhabited largely by Oklahomans.”⁴ This wartime migration significantly altered the landscape of North Long Beach, establishing the district as a predominantly working-class community with strong manufacturing roots. While the area still remains full of working-class families today, the area has become more ethnically and racially diverse in its demographics since the late twentieth century as Black, Latinx, and Asian American populations moved to the neighborhood.

Similar to today, residents in North Long Beach have long grappled with issues related to infrastructure and inequitable funding in their community. In the 1940s, what is now considered the 9th district experienced significant flooding during the rainy seasons. Residents noted that the streets were often impassable due to the high water levels. The *Long Beach Tribune* attributed

⁴ Ken McCafferty, “Light Whines and Jeers,” *Long Beach Tribune*, May 1, 1941; Ken McCafferty, “Light Whines and Jeers,” *Long Beach Tribune*, May 8, 1941; Ken McCafferty, “Light Whines and Jeers,” *Long Beach Tribune*, October 16, 1941.

this flooding to broken sewers and poorly paved streets. The city initially planned to address these infrastructural issues using public funds from the New Deal's Public Works Administration (PWA). The city intended to construct an underground lateral drain on Artesia Boulevard to connect the neighborhood's sewer system, but wartime needs overshadowed the city's project.⁵ Although Artesia Boulevard received a new paving job in April 1941, it was widely seen as low-quality. McCafferty joked that "experts on street construction [in North Long Beach] were about as plentiful as bartenders at a temperance meeting," which highlights the persistent budget constraints for the 9th district that led to inadequate facilities in the community.⁶ Recently, Mayor Rex Richardson has turned his attention to the ongoing problems on Artesia Boulevard, which remains one of the most dangerous streets in North Long Beach. To address this, the city allocated thirty-six million dollars from the infrastructure fund towards improving a three-mile stretch of the busy street. While the project began in February 2023, it is still in progress.⁷ These difficulties in both the past and modern day demonstrate a historical pattern of neglect and underfunding in the area, which leads to inequities within the cityscape. The fact that Artesia Boulevard continues to plague the region illustrates the long-standing issues and problems in the community. However, there is newfound progress and attention in North Long Beach that aims to develop the region and make it safer for its residents.

North Long Beach historically has been disconnected with the rest of the city, yet residents have consistently shown initiative to improve and make a difference in their community. One example of the perceived separation was a street sign posted at South Street and

⁵ Ken McCafferty, "Light Whines and Jeers," *Long Beach Tribune*, April 10, 1941; Ken McCafferty, "Light Whines and Jeers," *Long Beach Tribune*, November 27, 1941.

⁶ Ken McCafferty, "Light Whines and Jeers," *Long Beach Tribune*, April 17, 1941; Ken McCafferty, "Light Whines and Jeers," *Long Beach Tribune*, April 24, 1941.

⁷ Joy Contreras, "Press Release: Long Beach Celebrates Groundbreaking for Major Corridor Improvements on Artesia Boulevard" [longbeach.gov](https://www.longbeach.gov), February 1, 2023; Rex Richardson, "Interview with Mayor Rex Richardson," by Julie Bartolotto and Victoria Roa, Historical Society of Long Beach, March 3, 2024.

Orange Avenue. This sign indicated that Long Beach was five miles away while North Long Beach was listed separately as being just one mile away. McCafferty questioned this sign, asking “When did we secede?,” reflecting North Long Beach residents’ opinions that the area did not need to be listed separately.⁸ Despite feeling excluded from the rest of the city, North Long Beach residents worked to enhance their neighborhood. In the 1940s the North Long Beach Improvement Association met regularly to advocate for better streets, the construction of community pools, and to make improvements at Houghton Park.⁹ In an oral history interview with the Historical Society of Long Beach, district 8 Councilmember Al Austin noted that, since the 2000s, neighborhood associations have made notable strides in North Long Beach, forming new groups to address the needs of new neighborhoods within the district.¹⁰ This demonstrates a history of community organizing in the region during the mid-twentieth century that continues on today. The North Long Beach community has been working to include themselves within the city of Long Beach for eighty years and recently has had sustained community engagement to overcome historical challenges and build connections within the area.

Changing Demographics in North Long Beach

In the mid-to-late twentieth century and beyond, the demographic landscape of North Long Beach began to shift as new populations arrived. In the 1950s, the majority white population in North Long Beach prevailed due to housing discrimination within the city’s borders. During this time, most African Americans resided in neighboring cities such as Compton. It was not until the late 1960s – around the time of the Fair Housing Act of 1968 – that

⁸ Ken McCafferty, “Light Whines and Jeers,” *Long Beach Tribune*, May 15, 1941

⁹ Ken McCafferty, “Light Whines and Jeers,” *Long Beach Tribune*, April 10, 1941

¹⁰ Al Austin, “Interview with Councilmember Al Austin,” by Amarakvati Murphy Ly, Historical Society of Long Beach, April 5, 2024.

the first Black family moved into North Long Beach. By 1960, there were 9,600 African Americans living in Long Beach as a whole, and this number grew to 40,000 twenty years later, with many settling in North Long Beach. A Long Beach real-estate broker in the 1980s remarked that North Long Beach ““turned black overnight,”” highlighting the rapid changes within a few decades.¹¹ These changes did not go without criticism, though. As people of color moved into the 9th district, observers noted that the area had become “a rich melting pot of race and culture,” but also worried that it was “not as safe nor as comfortable.” Robert Paternoster, the city’s Planning Director, acknowledged that the integration of Long Beach contributed to white flight.¹² These demographic shifts helped make the neighborhood more diverse, and eventually fostered political leadership by these minorities.

The demographics in North Long Beach continued to evolve at the turn of the century. The housing bubble burst in 2008, creating new opportunities for younger generations to become homeowners in the area. This influx of first-time buyers, many of whom were educated, working-class individuals and people of color, led to a decrease in the average age and added to the diversity of the neighborhood. Among these new homeowners was Rex Richardson, who became the Mayor of Long Beach in 2022. At just twenty-five years old, Richardson purchased an affordable house in the 9th district, illustrating the potential North Long Beach had that drew many to the area. Today, North Long Beach is home to the largest Black population in the city, in contrast to previous decades when African American populations were more concentrated in Central and East Long Beach.¹³ These trends reflect the changing social factors within the

¹¹ Cynthia Kirkwood, “Blacks in L.B. find racism – and opportunity,” *Press-Telegram*, c. 1981.

¹² Daryl Kelley, “Long Beach: ‘a city with its fingers crossed,’” *Press-Telegram*, c. 1981; Daryl Kelley, “Optimism reigns among Long Beach residents,” *Press-Telegram*, c. 1981, 4.

¹³ Richardson, “Interview with Mayor Rex Richardson”; “Fostering an ‘Uptown Renaissance’: Rex Richardson, Vice Mayor, Long Beach, CA.”

neighborhood. The influx of diverse, young, and educated homeowners to the area has contributed to its ongoing efforts towards greater representation in Long Beach.

Continued Exclusion in the Late 20th and Early 21st Centuries

In the late twentieth century, North Long Beach continued to experience exclusion from the rest of Long Beach. For decades the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department – rather than the Long Beach Police Department – policed North Long Beach. This left many in the neighborhood feeling isolated and seeing themselves under the jurisdiction of a different region. Besides lacking local police services, North Long Beach also did not have a rescue unit or paramedics, which resulted in longer response times to emergencies. Not only did these factors lead to a cultural disconnect with the city, but they also perpetuated inequities within the city because these residents did not have the same access to essential services. Al Austin contends in his oral history interview with the Historical Society of Long Beach that a previous, unnamed mayor even considered the disincorporation of North Long Beach, or removing it from the city.¹⁴ This demonstrates that both North Long Beach residents and the city's politicians mutually felt this sense of separation between the two regions.

In the 1980s, residents of North Long Beach called the region the “Compton frontier” which reflects the perception that they were not truly a part of the city. A city-wide survey at the time showed that North Long Beach residents rated their city the lowest out of any district, citing safety concerns and a lack of response from public officials. However, the polltakers did rate their neighbors as friendly and helpful.¹⁵ These ratings reveal strong community bonds despite

¹⁴ Richardson, “Interview with Mayor Rex Richardson”; Austin, “Interview with Councilmember Al Austin”; Steve Neal, “Interview with Steve Neal,” by Mihir Pandya, Historical Society of Long Beach, April 5, 2024.

¹⁵ “The Changing Face of Long Beach,” *Press-Telegram*, c. 1981, 7.

their broader feelings that the city neglected the district. One reason these residents may have felt disconnected and unsafe is because of the lack of development and investment in their area.

According to an oral history interview conducted with Mayor Rex Richardson, until recent years, North Long Beach had no banks, coffee shops, or libraries. Instead, motels and liquor stores dominated the area, which hindered its growth, safety, and popularity.¹⁶ Despite these obstacles, many leaders in North Long Beach have recognized the district's potential and are working to gain community, political, and economic support for the region.

Although new political leaders in the 2000s and 2010s dedicated themselves to improving Long Beach's 9th district, aspiring politicians had to overcome the so-called "old guard" and replace the leadership within the city council. In American politics, the old guard refers to legacy politicians who wield considerable influence due to their decades of experience and connections built within their terms. Mayor Rex Richardson applies the term old guard to Long Beach politics to illustrate that these politicians are typically more conservative and resistant to change. In North Long Beach during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the old guard represented the 9th district of the 1940s: older, white leaders with conservative social and economic policies. In his oral history interview, Mayor Rex Richardson explains that in North Long Beach, this group includes many veterans whose main project is the Veterans' Day parade, embodying conservative politics. Additionally, Councilman Al Austin emphasizes that the old guard represents demographics no longer reflective of North Long Beach, which now has a more diverse population. This old guard valued neighborhood preservation and protectionism, creating a divide with the growing Black and Latinx communities in the neighborhood. Even so, a new generation of progressive leaders of color emerged, ready to make a difference in the 8th and 9th

¹⁶ Richardson, "Interview with Mayor Rex Richardson"; "Fostering an 'Uptown Renaissance': Rex Richardson, Vice Mayor, Long Beach, CA," CivitasLA, June 29, 2021, <https://civitasla.com/fostering-an-uptown-renaissance-rex-richardson-vice-mayor-long-beach-ca/>.

districts to help North Long Beach gain prominence and funding in the city and make city politics more inclusive. Al Austin recalls creating the Long Beach Young Democrats group in 1997 with John Harlan because they did not see people their age in the political sphere.¹⁷ The presence of these new voices in North Long Beach's political scene laid the groundwork for up-and-coming leaders to join the Long Beach City Council in the 2000s. These generational and ideological shifts were crucial for the improvement of North Long Beach, as these new leaders of color have paved the way for a more responsive city government that better serves the needs of all areas of Long Beach.

The New Guard in North Long Beach

In the mid-2000s, North Long Beach underwent a significant change in political leaders. The old guard, clinging to conservative values, failed to address calls for greater inclusivity and development in the district. This gave rise to a new generation of leaders – the new guard – who embraced more liberal politics. This group of new guard politicians implemented a strategy of building interethnic coalitions and aimed to empower residents through grassroots tactics. The new guard champions diversity, fights against funding inequities in North Long Beach, and builds civic engagement in a previously disengaged part of the city. Their ultimate goal is to elevate North Long Beach's profile within Long Beach. As district 8 Councilmember Al Austin stated, North Long Beach has long been marginalized and thought of as “an afterthought.” Instead, the new guard is determined to make it relevant and integrate it socially, culturally, and economically into the city.¹⁸ These new ideologies reflect a new era within North Long Beach

¹⁷ Richardson, “Interview with Mayor Rex Richardson”; Austin, “Interview with Councilmember Al Austin.”

¹⁸ Austin, “Interview with Councilmember Al Austin.”

politics, one where residents and politicians will no longer passively accept their community's neglect. These North Long Beach residents claim their rightful place within the city.

The new guard's rise to power did not come without hurdles. To instate the new guard, they needed to win elections. The up-and-coming politicians noticed that Long Beach's City Council underrepresented its diverse population. At this time, Black political representation was limited to a single city council seat – district 6, historically the Black seat on the council – as well as one school board seat, and one community college trustee position. Many activists saw Black political influence fading and sought a more inclusive city government. Younger politicians with experience in labor unions and student government saw an opportunity to mobilize their communities and challenge the existing power dynamics in the city that favored wealthier, older and white candidates.¹⁹ Their optimism stemmed from their belief that they could connect with their neighbors and labor groups to gain the support needed to reshape the political scene of North Long Beach.

The 9th district opened a new chapter in the city's politics when they ushered in the new guard. Initially, Al Austin, a seasoned union leader in the aerospace industry with experience working for a State Senator, was approached to run for this seat in the 2006 election year. However, Austin did not live in the 9th district and prioritized his young children. Instead, he proposed a different candidate: Steve Neal. Neal had deep roots in the labor movement with the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor and had been an activist in his community for years, which made him a compelling candidate. Though he narrowly lost the 2006 city council race by about 100 votes, Neal ran a successful campaign in 2010. North Long Beach's large Black population and working class demographics provided strong support for his candidacy. Neal's

¹⁹ Austin, "Interview with Councilmember Al Austin"; Richardson, "Interview with Mayor Rex Richardson," Steve Neal, "Interview with Steve Neal," by Mihir Pandya, Historical Society of Long Beach, March 22, 2024.

success stemmed from his ability to build a broad coalition and illustrate the potential in North Long Beach. His victory marked a significant shift because, traditionally, the 6th district representing Central Long Beach served as the “Black seat” on the city council.²⁰ Neal’s election added another African American voice to city leadership and made the city’s government more diverse.

After Neal took office, he wanted to build political support that furthered the interests of his constituents and built community solidarity. To do so, Neal appointed the now-Mayor Rex Richardson as his chief of staff. Together, they implemented a community empowerment model in North Long Beach. This approach looked beyond political leaders and turned to the community for support. The model sought collaboration and active community engagement. This model had two significant effects: it got North Long Beach residents more involved in their neighborhood and positioned Richardson to take the political baton in 2014. After his first term, Neal set his sights on the California Assembly. Richardson used the relationships he built as Neal’s chief of staff to launch a successful campaign for Neal’s 9th district Council seat. He secured over seventy percent of the vote, which illustrates the bonds he created with the community. This victory ultimately helped Richardson become vice mayor under Robert Garcia, and eventually, the city’s mayor in 2022.²¹

Although Al Austin did not run for the 9th district city council seat, he eventually became involved in Long Beach politics. Around 2011, he was approached to run for the 8th district seat for the 2012 election cycle. Initially he dismissed this idea, thinking it was unrealistic, because a Black person had never won an election in the district before. His focus shifted after analyzing

²⁰ Neal, “Interview with Steve Neal,” March 22, 2024; Neal, “Interview with Steve Neal,” April 5, 2024; Austin, “Interview with Councilmember Al Austin”; Richardson, “Interview with Mayor Rex Richardson.”

²¹ Neal, “Interview with Steve Neal,” March 22, 2024; Neal, “Interview with Steve Neal,” April 5, 2024; Richardson, “Interview with Mayor Rex Richardson.”

the area, since he saw an opportunity to mobilize the previously ignored region of North Long Beach within the district. This untapped pool of voters gave him an opportunity to build support and succeed in the election. These residents found hope in having a Black person on the ballot and appreciated being approached in the campaign cycle, as they previously had not been included.²²

While his opponent, Lilian Kawasaki, was also a minority as a Japanese woman, she embodied the old guard's approach. As a veteran public servant with thirty years experience in the Department of Water and Power and the Los Angeles Community Development Department, she gained endorsements and campaign contributions from the political establishment. Moreover, Kawasaki focused on traditional canvassing in affluent, whiter areas that were historically known to be politically engaged. Despite her experience, the 2012 election illustrated that community ties trumped political ties in local races. In a debate between Kawasaki and Austin, he emphasized his union experience in bringing people with diverse needs together and the problem-solving skills he harnessed. Additionally, he highlighted his community involvement, like working with a local YMCA and the Los Cerritos PTA. He also criticized Kawasaki, saying she would not represent the entire district, implying that she would exclude the North Long Beach neighborhoods.²³ Austin's campaign represents part of the Long Beach new guard's ideology to bring North Long Beach to the forefront and include it in policy decisions.

After campaigning in North Long Beach and gaining significant support from the community and labor, Al Austin won the 8th district city council seat. Austin himself was surprised at the results of the election because of Kawasaki's resume. His victory marked a historic flip of a white seat. Austin's campaign serves as an example to the new guard's strategy

²² Austin, "Interview with Councilmember Al Austin."

²³ Austin, "Interview with Councilmember Al Austin"; CJ Dablo, "Contenders for the LB eighth district council seat face-off again at Los Cerritos Elementary School forum," *The Signal Tribune*, March 9, 2012.

of mobilizing previously marginalized voices through community building. With Austin's inauguration into the city council, the board now had three African American men representing the community. African Americans comprised about twelve percent of the city's population, but now represented thirty percent of the council.²⁴ This is a noteworthy shift in local government, since there is now more Black representation in city politics.

The victories of Steve Neal, Al Austin, and Rex Richardson represented the new guard's hold on power in North Long Beach. This shift promised meaningful change in the area, which focuses on better integration within the broader city and stronger representation for the area's needs on the city council. Councilmember Austin views the new guard as successful, since they have secured a fairer share of resources for North Long Beach and have many plans for the future underway. More importantly, Long Beach is finally paying attention to the area. Austin also highlighted Rex Richardson's rise to mayor as an example of the testament of the new guard. Richardson is the first mayor to come from the 9th district and embodies the new generation of leader's success in involving their community.²⁵ Ultimately, the shift from the old guard to the new guard reveals a transfer of power within North Long Beach. Elections in the 2000s and 2010s illustrate that North Long Beach is moving away from traditional leadership as the sole authority for the district. Instead, decisions regarding development are being made by a new generation of younger, more diverse leaders.

The Uptown Renaissance and Building Community Ties

With the new guard in place, political leaders of North Long Beach set out to revitalize their neighborhoods. These reformers faced systemic inequities, difficult to overcome, in this

²⁴ Austin, "Interview with Councilmember Al Austin."

²⁵ Austin, "Interview with Councilmember Al Austin."

project. A historic lack of investment and inadequate resources left the district's infrastructure in a poor condition, as seen in the poor street paving and sewer systems from the 1940s. These new politicians realized that North Long Beach desperately needed to catch up to the rest of the city, but the efforts clashed with the city's budget deficit and cuts to various city programs. North Long Beach representatives needed to convince the city to prioritize North Long Beach and the district's urgent needs. Building upon the foundation laid by Steve Neal, Rex Richardson and the new guard devised a plan: the Uptown Renaissance. This initiative aimed to pour monetary investment, time commitments, and focused attention towards North Long Beach so it could thrive.²⁶

The new guard led the initial push, led by the public sector, to bring the Uptown Renaissance goal to fruition. As vice mayor, Rex Richardson championed the Uptown Planning Land Use and Neighborhood Strategy (UPLAN), which he kindly refers to as the "up-plan." This strategy aimed to revitalize North Long Beach through inclusive investments in areas north of the 405 Freeway. UPLAN invested in public facilities such as the Michelle Obama Neighborhood Library and Jordan High School. Jordan High School received \$200 million to modernize the campus, update their facilities and classrooms, and revamp their auditorium. The city has also renovated the Houghton Park Community Center, fixing its leaky roof to make it the most modern facility in the city. Additionally, a \$43 million project enhanced Artesia Boulevard, improving safety for pedestrians, cyclists, and drivers alike. Public safety received further attention with the construction of Fire Station 12, which has reduced response times by three minutes. The free Jazz Fest at Alben Park also provides an outlet for community engagement. The city is even looking to work with Long Beach City College to start training

²⁶ Neal, "Interview with Steve Neal," April 5, 2024; Richardson, "Interview with Mayor Rex Richardson."

programs in North Long Beach in the construction fields because of the industrial space within the district. This will not only help develop and improve the region, but also provide great learning experiences for college students.²⁷ These initiatives show that the new guard now uses the city's power to channel funds to better North Long Beach. These efforts are not mere upgrades to the infrastructure, but have also built a stronger sense of community and pride in the area.

The new guard recognized that public investment alone would not start a renaissance in the northern part of the city. To fully incorporate North Long Beach, they needed to attract private investment as well. Local leaders aimed to generate revenue, create new attractions, and draw more people to the district. By establishing a solid foundation with public projects like the library, park, and high school renovations, local leaders created a more attractive environment for businesses. Mayor Richardson stated in his oral history interview with the Historical Society of Long Beach that historically, North Long Beach lacked basic businesses like banks and coffee shops. When North Long Beach residents wanted to meet out in public, many of them traveled to the Bixby Knolls neighborhood instead because of the lack of places to go in their own community. Thanks to the work of the Uptown Renaissance plan, multiple independent coffee shops, two Starbucks, and a Chase Bank arrived in the area. These have helped boost the region's economy, which allowed for six new restaurants to open in North Long Beach since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Long Beach State Quarterly Economic Report, while the pandemic caused a 59% decline in revenue for most of the city, North Long Beach actually experienced a 37% increase. This success is attributed to the fact that North Long Beach has many staple stores such as bodegas that provided necessary items during the lockdown. As

²⁷ "Fostering an 'Uptown Renaissance': Rex Richardson, Vice Mayor, Long Beach, CA"; Steve Neal, "Interview with Steve Neal," April 5, 2024; Richardson, "Interview with Mayor Rex Richardson."

Mayor Richardson pointed out, North Long Beach’s “weaknesses became [their] virtues.”²⁸ The growing economy in the area demonstrates the effectiveness of the Uptown Renaissance, and North Long Beach is visually transforming into a more appealing area.

Besides local government intervention and investment from the private sphere, the new leaders in North Long Beach prioritized community engagement as a sign of the Uptown Renaissance’s success. In an oral history interview, Al Austin emphasized the importance of messaging to accomplish this. He believes in stressing inclusivity in decision-making, welcoming diverse voices, and valuing residents’ opinion to encourage participation in local politics and community events. Mayor Richardson and Steve Neal’s “Building a Better 9th District Community” program exemplifies this resident-centered approach. The program’s four phrases – establishing communication channels, identifying assets in North Long Beach, partnering with local organizations, and community outreach – laid the groundwork for active resident participation. In the program, local activists nicknamed “captains” each took on a weekly commitment to emphasize the wealth of opportunities available to those in the area. Richardson highlighted the story of Manny, a resident who worked towards an alley repavement initiative in North Long Beach, since the services had not been offered in the neighborhood for a decade.²⁹ The Uptown Renaissance strategy reused the community empowerment model Richardson implemented as Councilman Steve Neal’s chief of staff to help gain support for community improvement. The tactics implemented by the leaders of the Uptown Renaissance aimed to empower residents of North Long Beach to take initiative and shape their community.

²⁸ Richardson, “Interview with Mayor Rex Richardson”; “Fostering an ‘Uptown Renaissance’: Rex Richardson, Vice Mayor, Long Beach, CA.”

²⁹ Austin, “Interview with Councilmember Al Austin”; Richardson, “Interview with Mayor Rex Richardson.”

The new guard's initiatives to build community support fostered a spirit of engagement, as seen in the emergence of independent organizations that continue to make progress in North Long Beach. One example is the North Long Beach Community Action Group (CAG). Founded in 1994, CAG has a long history of activism. Since the 2000s, the group has actively built solidarity among residents, fostered connections with local businesses, and spearheaded beautification and safety initiatives. They also play an important role in keeping residents informed about local events and council meetings to promote civic engagement in the 9th district.³⁰ These organizations reveal that paying attention to the North Long Beach area has empowered its residents and allowed them to assert agency within their community.

The Uptown Renaissance initiatives have also inspired activism in the individual neighborhoods within North Long Beach. North Long Beach's large geographic scale necessitated the creation of organizations to meet the needs of their local areas. In the past two decades, new neighborhood designations have been created within North Long Beach, which has built a stronger sense of community identity among residents. Councilman Austin sees it as a point of pride that residents can now identify their specific neighborhoods in North Long Beach, which helps the city council in finding solutions to address localized issues. Councilman Austin and former Councilman Neal both observed the rise in neighborhood associations in North Long Beach in the last ten to fifteen years. Neal stated in his oral history interview that the number of North Long Beach associations nearly doubled during his time as the 9th district Councilmember.³¹ This surge demonstrates growing dedication and desires to improve their community.

³⁰ Historical Society of Long Beach, "A History of North Long Beach," 2007.

³¹ Austin, "Interview with Councilmember Al Austin"; Neal, "Interview with Steve Neal," April 5, 2024.

The new guard's leadership and the Uptown Renaissance strategy have energized North Long Beach, driving it to a position of prominence in city politics. Inclusive leadership encouraged deeper community investment, which has translated into increased voter turnout in the 8th and 9th districts. Al Austin's successful 2012 campaign, aided by canvassing in North Long Beach, exemplifies this trend. It is important to acknowledge other contributing factors to larger turnout, including the city's realignment of elections and demographic shifts in the 2000s that brought a more educated population to the area. However, North Long Beach residents now represent a significant voting bloc and hold greater influence on local initiatives and candidates than ever before. Former Councilman Neal attributes this to the fact that love for their community translates into increased involvement in local elections and relevant issues. He remembers the city council's surprise when nine residents from North Long Beach, a community that rarely attended meetings, came to ask for help in their community. Because of their display of unprecedented initiative, the council unanimously voted in their favor. This surge in civic participation has inspired a new wave of Black leadership in North Long Beach.³² With Councilwoman Joni Ricks-Oddie representing the 9th district, and more Black representation in the mayorship and the city council, North Long Beach and previously marginalized voices are represented at last.

Conclusion

North Long Beach, once a neglected district, is experiencing a renaissance. Decades of underinvestment following its annexation in the 1920s may have stunted the region's growth, but activists are determined to make sure the area is no longer an afterthought. The district has made

³² Neal, "Interview with Steve Neal"; Austin, "Interview with Councilmember Al Austin"; Richardson, "Interview with Mayor Rex Richardson."

considerable strides to consolidate itself into the city and create a stronger identity within Long Beach and in city politics. These efforts are seen in the new generation of leaders in the area, who prioritize inclusivity and have secured city funding for resources. This public investment has, in turn, encouraged private investment and community engagement. The revitalization of North Long Beach is far from over, but its trajectory is clear. The district is gaining influence, embracing its diversity, and will grow in prominence, all driven by the very community it serves.

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