

PRESS-TELEGRAM

LOCAL NEWS

Long Beach mayor says ‘city is booming’ in annual address

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In his fourth State of the City address Tuesday night, Long Beach Mayor Robert Garcia pointed to the more than \$3 billion in construction work underway as a sign of strength for the city.

When he delivered his first address as mayor three years ago, Garcia said he asked to be judged by the number of construction cranes in the air and hard hats on the streets. Today there are dozens of major projects underway, including the largest bridge on the West Coast, a nearly \$1 billion Civic Center complex and hundreds of new affordable housing units.

“Our city is booming, and it’s up to us to ensure that our strong economy and growth is working for everyone,” he said.

Garcia, who recently turned 40, spent most of his time Tuesday painting an optimistic picture of the port city, but he did take time to touch on several challenges facing officials in the coming year, including a [multi-million dollar budget deficit](#) and a [controversial land use plan](#).

He also used the platform to announce a handful of programs on the horizon, such as a new justice initiative that aims to reduce the number of repeat criminal offenders in the city to help further reduce crime rates, which saw an overall decline in 2017.

Achievements

- Millions of dollars in “critical” infrastructure and public safety investments under Measure A, a temporary sales tax increase approved by voters in 2016;
- 7.9 percent reduction in overall crime, including homicide and theft, as well as the [lowest homicide rate](#) recorded in 50 years;
- 2.3 percent reduction in the poverty rate from 2014 to 2016, or about 10,000 fewer Long Beach residents whose wages fall under the federal poverty line (2017 numbers are not yet available);
- 4.4 percent unemployment rate in 2017 (a record low), similar to trends seen in major cities across California and the nation;
- [Adoption of the Clean Air Action Plan](#), a joint agreement between the Long Beach and Los Angeles ports to achieve a zero emissions port complex by 2035;
- Long Beach Police Department [began patrolling the Blue Line stations](#) in Long Beach as part of a larger effort to make the county’s most dangerous Metro line safer.

Challenges

- City officials are working to prevent the [closure of Community Hospital](#) after seismic studies found the structure could sustain major damage in the event of an earthquake;
- Leaders will consider a proposed land use plan (the Land Use Element) early this year; Garcia said leaders need to have a more thoughtful debate about the proposed plan, which aims to provide a path to more housing across the city;
- Rental rates in Long Beach have consistently risen in recent years, resulting in the displacement of some of the city's more vulnerable populations, including seniors, students and families on fixed incomes. The City Council is expected to introduce an initiative to address the issue this month;
- Although Long Beach saw a dip in the number of people experiencing homelessness in 2016, the issue is still at the forefront for many residents as several thousand people are still without a place to lay their heads at night; Garcia called it a "tragic reality" in the city and said it is a statewide issue that needs to be addressed;
- Long Beach finance officials have projected budget shortfalls of \$32-\$38 million through 2021. One way to address the impending deficit could be an amendment to the city charter that would allow some \$8 million per year to be funneled from the water and sewer departments to the general fund, which elected officials will discuss on Wednesday;
- There is a "trucking crisis at the region's twin ports. Garcia called it a "broken system" that can no longer be sustained. Drivers work for poverty wages, trucks are not moving through terminals efficiently and employees are often misclassified, he said, resulting in wage theft and other issues. Garcia called on local and state leaders to create a policy that supports these workers and rewards the companies that are "doing the right thing."

On the horizon

- During his address, the mayor called for the formation of an Economic Development Corporation, a nonprofit organization that would focus on ensuring inclusion for aspiring entrepreneurs and business owners. similar to an approach taken by other major cities;
- He announced the creation of the Long Beach Justice Lab, a Bloomberg collaboration between the city's Innovation Team and its public safety agencies, health department and city prosecutor's office that would provide services to frequent justice system users (repeat offenders) to help break a dangerous cycle of arrest and release;
- Garcia asked the City Council to immediately consider recommendations to improve Long Beach Animal Care Services based on [a recent audit](#) of the department's operations that found strained resources are creating a stressful environment for the animals;
- The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is expected to unveil its preferred options for restoring the San Pedro Bay, including recommendations to reconfigure the breakwater. Garcia said he expects to have a plan and funding figured out by year's end.

The mayor closed his address by pledging to stand up for all Long Beach residents regardless of the actions taken at the federal level. He vowed to keep Long Beach a city that values diversity, saying that “societies that value inclusion have always provided more for their people and had stronger economies.”

And Long Beach, he continued, “must lead with a strong vision, a sense of justice and kindness for all its people.”