

PRESS-TELEGRAM

LOCAL NEWS

Leadership Long Beach's behind-the-scenes look at city government

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Former Mayor Beverly O'Neill is interviewed by Rich Archbold at Leadership Long Beach's government and media day Monday, March 5, 2018 (Courtesy)

Long Beach was in a deep hole in 1994. Congress had ordered the closure of the Long Beach Naval Station. Thousands of aviation workers were being laid off at McDonnell Douglas. The city's retail base was shrinking. The outlook was bleak.

Stepping into this void was Beverly O'Neill, a 63-year-old educator at Long Beach City College who had never run for political office. She ran for mayor of Long Beach and won, beating out nine opponents. She went on to win two more terms, including one as a write-in candidate. She became the first person in Long Beach history to win three terms as elected mayor and the first person in the United States to win as a write-in candidate in a major city.

Why would she, with no elected political experience, want to take on the leadership role as mayor of a city that was "in a mess."

"Simply put, I loved this city and I thought I could make a difference," O'Neill told a rapt audience of members of the Leadership Long Beach Class of 2018 on "Governance and Media Day" last week.

As part of their year-long leadership training, the Class of 2018 spent a day at City Hall on Monday getting a behind-the-scenes look at how city government works and what leadership skills are needed to get things done.

In addition to O'Neill, they heard from current Mayor Robert Garcia, City Auditor Laura Doud, City Prosecutor Doug Haubert, City Clerk Monique De La Garza and Assistant City Attorney Michael Mais.

Class members also participated in a mock city council session as they played the roles of council members and taxpayers. They also heard from Melissa Evans, city editor of the Press-Telegram, who gave a talk about the role of the media in covering community issues and holding officials accountable for their actions.

O'Neill described her style of leadership as listener, collaborator and facilitator. "You need to work as a team and work with people in a positive way," she said. In dealing with the public, it doesn't work to yell at someone and then ask that person to help you. She said she was able to build the city back up by implementing the "Three Ts: Trade, Tourism and Technologies."

Mayor Garcia, in describing his leadership style, said he admired both O'Neill and former Mayor Bob Foster who preceded him and was known for a more gruff style.

"I feel like I'm a little bit of both of them," he said.

Garcia is running for reelection and said he wasn't sure what he would do when his second term expires. "One thing I do know," he told the class, "I eventually will end up in the classroom because I love teaching. There's no better place than that." He said housing and determining ways to help homeless people is the major challenge facing the city and California.

He said he hoped his legacy would be that he helped create a more inclusive city of the future. "That can be painful, but it's the right thing to do," he said. "It is better to build a bridge than a wall."

Auditor Doud told class members that their goal should be to build relationships with each other and the public "even if you disagree with someone. Be open to all voices."

The 2018 class members have come a long way since they bonded at their retreat 7,000 feet high in the San Bernardino Mountains last September. They are calling themselves the "Courageous Class" in finding solutions to the city's problems. They will present the projects they have been working on, including transitional youth, social justice and career jobs, at their graduation in June. The next class, the Class of 2018-2019, will mark the 30th anniversary of Leadership Long Beach. More than 1,000 people have gone through the program.

In recognition of that, Garcia said he will present a Key to the City to Leadership Long Beach and its executive director, Jeff Williams, in April. Carmen Perez, the city's first Latina Harbor Commissioner, also will be given a Key to the City.

"I haven't given our many of these Keys to the City, only a handful," Garcia said. "Leadership Long Beach and Carmen are most deserving for their service to the city."

In an evaluation session after the day's program, class members were asked to describe the day in one word. Here are some of their responses: "Inspiring." "Useful." "Educational." "Eye opening." "Awesome."