

# VENICE LIFEGUARD STATION

## DRAFT: STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### LOS ANGELES COUNTY LIFEGUARD STATION HISTORY

... The property is identified with the historic merger of three services to produce the busiest lifeguard service in the world.

The Los Angeles County Fire Department Lifeguard Division is said to be the busiest lifeguard service in the world. Employing nearly 800 lifeguard team members who protect 72 miles of coastal beaches, is is the largest Lifeguard Service in the world. The history of the Venice Lifeguard Station, located at 2300 Ocean Front Walk, illustrates the growth pattern that made this possible. <sup>1</sup>

### OWNERSHIP

The building was proudly built in 1968 by the City of Los Angeles under Mayor Sam Yorty.<sup>2</sup> It is owned by the City. Additionally, the land was granted to the City of Venice in 1917 and subsequently to the City of Los Angeles in 1945.<sup>3</sup> As of 1975, When the City merged it's Lifeguard Services with the County, the parties entered into a Joint Powers Agreement <sup>4</sup> whereby the City leases the building to the County for \$1/year together with other City owned lifeguard facilities, beach maintenance equipment, and parking lots. As the tenant, the County has the duty to maintain the building. Unfortunately, it has been derelict in its duty.

### LIFEGUARD SERVICE

The facility was home to three different lifeguard divisions through the years. In 1975, the original Los Angeles City Lifeguard Service was merged into the Los Angeles County Lifeguard Service (Department of Beaches). The City of Santa Monica merged its lifeguard service into the County the year prior to the merger. This created a cost-efficient service for 72 miles of coastline from Long Beach to the Ventura County Line and Catalina. All county wide lifeguard

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1. LA County Fire Department Lifeguard Division video <https://player.vimeo.com/video/295883754?h=606d9ca65d> AND <https://5280fire.com/home/other-states-fire-apparatus-stations/california/los-angeles-county-fire-department/los-angeles-county-fire-department-lifeguard-division/>

<sup>2</sup>Dedication Document <https://www.venicenc.org/assets/documents/5/committee636d6ecefbc3.jpg>

<sup>3</sup> CA State Lands Commission <https://www.dropbox.com/s/54tiyt6cis57ixl/Lifeguard%20LAND%20ownership%20re%201945%20Venice%20Land%20Grant.rtf?dl=0>

<sup>4</sup>Joint Powers Agreement <https://www.venicenc.org/ncfiles/download/60>

Administrative Services were relocated to the Venice Lifeguard Station tower (the top 2 stories of the building).<sup>5</sup>

In time, the Department of Beaches merged with Small Craft Harbors creating the Department of Beaches and Harbors. In 1994, the Lifeguard Division of the Department of Beaches and Harbors was transferred to the management of the Los Angeles County Fire Department. Many units were relocated to Manhattan Beach, where the old Department of Beaches facility was remodeled, to house numerous functions as the Lifeguard Division took on additional responsibilities.

In 2017, the remaining personnel vacated the Venice Lifeguard Station tower, (the second and third stories) and moved to Manhattan Beach, for the convenience of the then Lifeguard Chief. The ground floor continues to be in use 24/7 for both Lifeguard Services and Beach Maintenance and equipment for Venice Beach. While the tower remains vacant, it is the pride of current and past lifeguards and a beloved icon of Venice beach.

## DISASTER AVERTED

By chance, the Venice community learned that instead of maintaining the Lifeguard Station, as is required by their lease, and without authorization, the County Department of Beaches and Harbors was preparing to demolish the iconic tower portion of the historic building. Contrary to County assertions, documentary evidence confirms that the building is City-owned and is found to have “no structural deficiencies.”<sup>6</sup>

To date, over 1,500 neighbors have signed a petition opposing demolition of the iconic Lifeguard Station tower.<sup>7</sup> December 26, 2022, the Venice Neighborhood Council filed a motion asking that the tower be evaluated for repairs and if not needed for lifeguard services, that it be repurposed as a public venue.<sup>8</sup>

January 5, 2023, Commissioners of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks heard the demolition proposal from the County Department of Beaches and Harbors and denied their proposal.<sup>9</sup> March 21, 2023, Los Angeles City Councilperson Traci Park, representing Venice,

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<sup>5</sup>Mickey Gallagher Lifeguard Station History [noteshttps://www.venicenc.org/assets/documents/5/committee644082e1e7596.pdf](https://www.venicenc.org/assets/documents/5/committee644082e1e7596.pdf)

<sup>6</sup>Building Repairs Assessment <https://www.venicenc.org/assets/documents/5/committee63784cf025ff5.pdf>

<sup>7</sup>Save the Lifeguard Tower Petition 1,411 Signatures <https://www.venicenc.org/assets/documents/5/committee6440a730ccf1b.pdf>

<sup>8</sup>Venice Neighborhood Council motion <https://www.venicenc.org/assets/documents/5/committee63c44e0a96263.pdf>

<sup>9</sup>Commissioner Halper, Department of Recreation & Parks Statement audio file <https://www.dropbox.com/s/ha50a5k44hzwpag/RAP%20Minutes%20Venice%20Lifeguard%20Tower.mp4?dl=0>

wrote County that demolition is not to occur and asking them to proceed with repairs.<sup>10</sup> She states that Los Angeles County Supervisor, Lindsey Horvath, concurs that demolition is not to move forward. The Los Angeles Conservancy has requested that an inaccurate de minimus waiver for demolition issued by the California Coastal Commission be invalidated.<sup>11</sup> The goal is to preserve the entire building and, if the tower portion is not needed by lifeguard services, to repurpose it as a community asset such as a public observation tower, lifeguard and/ or Oceanarium museum<sup>12</sup>.

## ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTER

... The property embodies the distinctive character of a style and method of construction in addition to being the work of a master architect.

The property was built in 1968 and owned by the City of Los Angeles as the Venice Lifeguard Station. It is the work of architects Prescott, Whalley & Weit<sup>13</sup> together with master landscape architects Cornell, Bridgers & Troller.<sup>14</sup> The architects built other public projects in Los Angeles, including fire stations and churches. The landscape architects are known for designing prominent public properties in Los Angeles including the UCLA campus and the LA Music Center Plaza.<sup>15</sup>

The building is an excellent example of Mid-Century institutional development featuring wood beam and glass with a wraparound deck.<sup>16</sup> It is a hexagonal ground floor building with a second and third story hexagonal central tower. The 40-foot tower with a third story observation deck is the most distinctive feature.

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<sup>10</sup>Council Member Traci Park Letter to County Department of Beaches & Harbors <https://www.venicenc.org/assets/documents/5/committee641a99049fda0.pdf>

<sup>11</sup>Los Angeles Conservancy Letter to CA Coastal Conservancy <https://www.venicenc.org/assets/documents/5/committee64346054a689a.pdf>

<sup>12</sup>Venice Oceanarium Website [veniceoceanarium.org](http://veniceoceanarium.org)

<sup>13</sup>Architects <http://historicplacesla.org/reports/85843fd6-b568-4f41-b05c-838a0f0e9ade> AND <https://www.flickr.com/photos/laconservancy/3969153431/in/photostream/> AND <https://www.dropbox.com/s/ezudwgilt9b4exb/ARCHITECTS%20Lifeguard%20Prescott%2C%20Whalley%2C%20Weit.pdf?dl=0>

<sup>14</sup>Venice Lifeguard Station original Blue Prints <https://www.dropbox.com/s/ext050h8sx2on7e/Blueprints%20VENICE%20LIFEGUARD%20Station.pdf?dl=0>

<sup>15</sup>Landscape Architects <https://www.dropbox.com/s/xm9gul7jqz4zv8s/Architects%20of%20Lifeguard%20Station.pdf?dl=0>

<sup>16</sup>LAC to BOS Venice Lifeguard Station <https://www.dropbox.com/s/t043nzwul00tisf/LAC%20to%20BoS%20lifeguard%20Station.png?dl=0>

Historic Places LA / SurveyLA identified the Venice Lifeguard Station as a "Rare example of a lifeguard station headquarters building in Venice; appears to be the only example along this stretch of the beach." <sup>17</sup>

The building repeats the distinctive hexagonal design of the historic Venice Beach "pagoda" shade structures which span Ocean Front Walk circa 1920's. This is evidenced with the inclusion of pagoda blueprints within the original blueprints<sup>18</sup> of the Venice Lifeguard Station, as well as by physical observation.

The view from the tower is an unparalleled 360-degree view of the entire Santa Monica Bay, the ocean, coastline, city and mountains. The building is located on the sand, in exactly the center of Santa Monica Bay.<sup>19</sup> It is a spectacular and irreplaceable view, available in all weather conditions. Surf conditions, flora and fauna within the ocean and on the beach can be seen from the tower. The tower provides an optimal site for studying environmental conditions including sea level rise and water conditions and quality. The site enables one to appreciate the beauty and majesty of our coastal marine habitat. The Venice Oceanarium engages the public in just that. Historically, owing to its uniquely optimal location and design, weather antennae mounted on the roof were used by weather services. A large adjacent public parking lot provides easy, direct access to the building.

Comparisons to other California Lifeguard Stations show this to be a far more elaborate and architecturally distinctive structure.

LONG BEACH LIFEGUARD STATION<sup>20</sup>: "The headquarters became a Long Beach historical heritage site in 1981" Roy "Dutch" Miller became a lifeguard in 1918. He stood at the helm of marine operations in Long Beach for five decades and was responsible for bringing a host of new innovations and lifeguarding techniques to the shores. He constructed lifeguard towers, brought in new, lifesaving equipment and pioneered Long Beach lifeguards until his retirement in 1966. The original lifeguard headquarters now stands at its current location on 2100 E. Ocean Blvd. It was moved in 1961 when the city moved the famed Rainbow Pier to make way for an expanded shoreline. In 1936, a devastating storm destroyed the tower, but it was rebuilt in 1938 with funding from President Franklin Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration program. The headquarters became a Long Beach historical heritage site in 1981, the same year it was crowned the Roy "Dutch" Miller Lifeguard Station.

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<sup>17</sup>Historical Places LA <http://historicplacesla.org/reports/bf27d24d-24d1-4f4e-b4a5-6ecb0a9c7e94>

<sup>18</sup>Venice Lifeguard Station original Blue Prints <https://www.dropbox.com/s/ext050h8sx2on7e/Blueprints%20VENICE%20LIFEGUARD%20Station.pdf?dl=0>

<sup>19</sup>Map of SM Bay <https://maps.apple.com/?ll=33.937841,-118.572582&q=&spn=0.499258,1.072091&t=h>

<sup>20</sup>Long Beach Lifeguard Station <https://www.lb908.com/post/2018/07/06/fun-fact-the-lifeguard-headquarters>

Owing to the wealth of lifeguard cultural history, Long Beach has a Lifeguard Museum<sup>21</sup>

LAGUNA BEACH LIFEGUARD TOWER<sup>22</sup>: It does not appear to have official landmark designation however is referred to as follows: “the lifeguard tower is historic. It is iconic. It is so deeply ingrained in our city’s landscape as to almost seem inextricably tied to the town.”

OCEAN BEACH, SAN DIEGO, LIFEGUARD TOWER<sup>23</sup>: 3171 Ocean Front Walk, San Diego, CA 92109. While the original lifeguard station is referred to as a “landmark” and seems to contain a museum, I am not sure if it is designated; it might be that the sculpture adjacent to the tower is what is referred to the “monument.”

LIGHTHOUSES: While not lifeguard stations, some California lighthouses are designated historic for their historic, cultural, architectural and environmental value. <https://www.travelinusa.us/california-lighthouses/>

<https://www.nps.gov/maritime/inventories/lights/ca.htm>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Point\\_Cabrillo\\_Light](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Point_Cabrillo_Light)

VENICE LIFEGUARDS - THE STATION HAS BEEN A FOCAL POINT FOR PEOPLE OF NOTE

... The property is associated with men and women who either made their mark as lifeguards and/or were prominent in other fields.

The Lifeguard Station has been the focal point, drawing prominent individuals over the past five decades. One individual whose career developed in association with the Venice Lifeguard Station, and was an important force in the understanding and protection of Santa Monica Bay and the entire California coastal zone is Dr. Rimmon C. Fay (1930-2008)<sup>24</sup>.

Rimmon C. Fay was a marine scientist and longtime part-time Venice Beach lifeguard until 2001, who devoted his life to saving the Santa Monica Bay from pollution and other assaults. Fay was a UCLA trained biochemist. He learned to dive in 1955, and frequently was accompanied on dives by Harold Dunnigan, a former Navy diver and retired Los Angeles County lifeguard. Fay made 4-6 dives a day, collecting live specimens for biomedical research at universities worldwide. He focused public attention on industrial discharges of the pesticide DDT off the Palos Verdes peninsula that made fish too toxic to eat and nearly drove the California brown pelican to extinction. He was among the first to call for Los Angeles to halt

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<sup>21</sup>Long Beach Lifeguard Museum [https://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WM4E6D\\_Lifeguard\\_Museum\\_Long\\_Beach\\_CA](https://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WM4E6D_Lifeguard_Museum_Long_Beach_CA)

<sup>22</sup>Laguna Beach Tower <https://www.visitlagunabeach.com/blog/laguna-beachs-hidden-histories-the-main-beach-lifeguard-tower/>

<sup>23</sup>Ocean Beach Lifeguard Tower <https://obrag.org/2013/12/when-was-obs-lifeguard-station-built/>

<sup>24</sup>Rimmon C. Fay LA Times Obituary <https://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-fay4jan04-story.html>

dumping of sewage sludge, a once-quixotic quest that drew kindred souls in the 1980s who joined with him to launch the movement to clean up coastal waters.

Fay was one of the original drafters of the California Coastal Act and a Commission on the Coastal Commission for 6 years, “until complaints to Sacramento leaders about his uncompromising anti-growth attitude and open outrage about damaging coastal wetlands and beachfront got him fired.”

“He was a rigorous, cantankerous guy who brought great scientific knowledge and integrity to the table, and I loved him for it,” said Peter Douglas, the (Coastal) commission’s executive director.”

“Although he saw some improvement in recent years, Fay was disappointed at the long-term trends that had transformed Southern California waters from a major fishing area into an industrial dump.”

The vantage point of the Venice Lifeguard Station was integral to his knowing “how the bay looked for over 40 years.”

Fay was also a founder of Heal the Bay and the Friends of the Ballona Wetlands.

The history of the LA County Fire Department Lifeguard Division is one of heroism, diversity, innovation and like much of Los Angeles, movie stars. The tower portion of the station would be an excellent location to present artifacts, tell stories and show images of our lifeguard service from its inception in the early 1900s. Following is a sampling of lifeguards who have had significant careers:

... George Freeth<sup>25</sup>, is considered the “father of modern ocean lifesaving,” and the first ever lifeguard. His ideas were instrumental in establishing, and through the years, revolutionizing the profession. He worked for Abbot Kinney, the visionary developer who created Venice of America. George was a Hawaiian transplant to Venice Beach in 1907.

... Myron F. Cox was the first Los Angeles City Lifeguard. He had a distinguished 44-year career from 1928 to 1972. He is remembered as being an innovator of essential policies and training that continue to be used to this day. Myron was revered and legendary in his own time. In addition to lifeguarding, he was a professional wrestler, professional swim coach and played professional football.

... Dr. Rimmon C. Fay, Marine Biologist/ Pioneer Commissioner of the CA Coastal Commission, who participated in writing the Coastal Act. He was also a Founder of Heal the Bay, a founder of The Friends of the Ballona Wetlands, stopped the dumping of DDT

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<sup>25</sup>KCET George Freeth: King of the Surfers and a Forgotten Hero <https://www.kcet.org/shows/lost-la/george-freeth-king-of-the-surfers-and-californias-forgotten-hero>

in the Santa Monica Bay, and generally instrumental in the forefront of understanding and preserving our marine environment.

... Pat Dixon, JD, LA County Assistant District Attorney and Special Council to the LA County District Attorney.

... Dr. Paul A. Silka, Emergency Medicine Doctor, Cedar Sinai Medical Center.

... Cindi Gallagher, 31 year UCLA Head Swim & Dive Coach. Twice named Pac-12 Coach of the Year, her tenure at UCLA produced 11 Olympians, 21 Pac-10/12 Champions, and 91 All-Americans.

... Arthur Verge, PhD, Professor of History at El Camino College, and a Venice Lifeguard Historian. His segment of "Tales from the Tower" provides fascinating information.<sup>26</sup>

... Richard Orr, Baltimore Colts Football Player, 33-yr LAUSD Teacher, 50-year lifeguard.

... Harold Dunnigan, Vice Principal Santa Monica High School, US Marine Diver, Dive instructor to Rimmon Fay.

... In 1973, Kai Nowell was the first female lifeguard assigned by Los Angeles City to serve at Venice Beach. Also, that year, Wendy Paskin was hired by Los Angeles County as its first female lifeguard.<sup>27</sup>

... John Thomas, Screen Writer of several major motion pictures.

... Greg Bonnan, Creator/Producer of the world renown Baywatch television show. Fictional Venice Beach Lifeguards were viewed by up to 1.1 billion people per episode, in 142 countries, translated into 15 languages.

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<sup>26</sup>Arthur Verge: Tales From the Tower [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FR\\_g3\\_DKSo8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FR_g3_DKSo8)

<sup>27</sup>Nowell / Paskin <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-08-30-me-8382-story.html>



... Tom Schnabel, Internationally recognized radio producer, pioneer, and innovator of world music. He helped to introduce world music to American audiences.

... Mickey Gallagher, 42-year career retired Los Angeles County Fire Department Lifeguard / Section Chief. Mickey, an underwater recovery specialist and Lifeguard Chief, worked out of the iconic tower portion of the building longer than anyone. He speaks to it's cultural history and unique unmatched magnificence.

... Over the past 40 years, at least one Los Angeles Lifeguard has competed in the Olympics. (I can ask for specification of who served in Venice. Here is a list of LA Lifeguard Olympians from over the past 92 years<sup>28</sup>)

SOURCES / some additional sources are in footnotes above

Dedication Document <https://www.venicenc.org/assets/documents/5/committee636d6eceafbc3.jpg>

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Petition Comments: <https://www.venicenc.org/assets/documents/5/committee6440a846cba5a.pdf>

Venice Neighborhood Council motion <https://www.venicenc.org/assets/documents/5/committee63c44e0a96263.pdf>

Nearly 800 team members Stats: <https://fire.lacounty.gov/emergency-operations/>

LA County Fire Department Lifeguard Division video <https://player.vimeo.com/video/295883754?h=606d9ca65d>

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<sup>28</sup>LA Lifeguard Olympians <https://www.dropbox.com/s/vlqzav36zo8h7s5/Olympian%20Lifeguard%20List%2012-15.pdf?dl=0>



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Laguna Beach Lifeguard Tower: <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Laguna+Beach+Lifeguard+Tower+restoring+a+city+icon.-a0100240898>

Venice Oceanarium Website [veniceoceanarium.org](http://veniceoceanarium.org)



VENICE LIFEGUARD STATION TOWER

**RESTORED & LANDMARKED LIFEGUARD BUILDINGS**  
in other California cities



OCEAN BEACH LIFEGUARD TOWER MONUMENT

## RESTORED & LANDMARKED LIFEGUARD BUILDINGS in other California cities



### LONG BEACH LIFEGUARD HEADQUARTERS

“...In 1936, a devastating storm destroyed the tower, but it was rebuilt in 1938. The headquarters became a Long Beach historical heritage site in 1981”

## RESTORED & LANDMARKED LIFEGUARD BUILDINGS in other California cities



### LAGUNA BEACH LIFEGUARD TOWER

“In the 70s, the city thought about destroying it, rather than bothering to keep up a building that was quickly becoming too small for the lifeguard force. ...local grassroots activists fought to preserve the tower ...because it was a source of inspiration. ‘