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15 Minutes With . . . George Chapjian, Director Of Parks, Recreation & Marine



George Chapjian is the director of the Long Beach Parks, Recreation and Marine Department, a post he assumed in January. He held a similar position in the City of Glendale. He holds master of social work degree and a master of science in gerontology degree from USC. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

During his first six months in office, the new director of the Long Beach Department of Parks, Recreation & Marine has been learning about the award-winning department and its staff, all the while preparing for budget reductions for the 2011-2012 fiscal year.

George Chapjian, who formerly served as director of community services and parks with the City of Glendale, told Staff Writer Tiffany Rider that he has already made some changes to the department – finding efficiencies and searching for new public-private partnership opportunities – to make sure services remain at an optimum level.

The city's parks department makes up 6 percent of the General Fund, or about \$10.6 million, and subsections of the department are funded through the Tidelands Fund. The city's most recent quarterly finance report shows the department generated \$3.9 million in revenues as of March 31. According to the report, this department, in addition to public safety, is projected to have the largest revenue shortfalls of all city departments funded through the General Fund through the end of the year.

However, Chapjian said the department is used to working with

a “lean” budget. For him, maintaining the current service level through finding efficiencies is key to continue providing low-cost recreation for citizens during these tough economic times, as well as for the city's cultural growth and keeping kids out of trouble. These are tied to Chapjian's passion for helping people, which he learned he wanted to do on a macro-level while pursuing his master's degree in social work at USC. His degree emphasis is on program planning and analysis, administration and community organization. He also has a master of science in gerontology, the study of aging from middle age through later life.

LBBJ: What major surprises have you encountered since starting the job in January?

Chapjian: The biggest one was how long the city has been in budget reduction mode. Most cities buried their heads and didn't start until two or three years ago. Long Beach has been in budget reduction mode for the past six to eight years. I think that's good, in one way. For me, though, having to continue the budget cuts when you're that lean makes it harder to cut more. We have to be creative in how we cut and come in within budget.



George Chapjian, director of the Long Beach Department of Parks, Recreation and Marine, is pictured at the El Dorado Regional Park West's skate park. He said the department is focused on maintaining the current level of service despite that it's expected to be one of the most financially impacted departments in the city for the 2011-2012 fiscal year. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

The other [surprise], which is really positive, is the proportional share cut. Most cities don't do that. Most cities will make cuts first from parks and recreation or libraries and leave the other departments like public safety alone. I think it's refreshing that Long Beach recognizes that parks and recreation, and libraries, are integral to public safety by keeping kids busy. Having programs for kids makes a huge difference in terms of the crime rate for kids. It's refreshing to have that perspective here. The prior city I was with, decimated the parks and recreation department recently, from what I understand.

LBBJ: What types of changes have you implemented in the structure of the department?

Chapjian: The first three to five months, for me, are an opportunity to learn, and I've only been here six months. I've been meeting with staff, watching, learning about the department, the community and the stakeholders. This is already a nationally recognized department. It's received numerous awards as the nation's best, so they must have been doing something right. But, having said that, we're starting to make some changes. We are looking at reducing inefficiencies in our department – positions that we no longer need. Two of the key things I've done are recruit and appoint two bureau staff people who are very important in the operation, and then look at public-private partnerships to help us with our parks. Those are the kinds of changes we've started implementing at this point. I'll continue to assess as things change. We need to be flexible enough to change with the times.

LBBJ: How many people does the department employ?

Chapjian: As of July 1, we have 1,311 employees on payroll. That's a combination of seasonal part-time, permanent part-time, temporary [and full-time].

LBBJ: How many volunteers does the department have? How much of the department relies on volunteer efforts?

Chapjian: We have over 400 volunteers, and nearly half of them volunteer at the senior center. We probably wouldn't be able to function at full capacity without those volunteers at the senior center. The nature center also has large support from volunteers. They have more than 60 volunteers with programs, trails, tours – that kind of thing. The remaining volunteers work in our youth sports programs, after-school programs, day camps, aquatics programs and others. We also have some volunteers who teach contract classes at our community centers. We have teen volunteers disbursed through the city parks during the school year, but the largest number of teen volunteers we get is during the summertime.

We put a monetary value to [our volunteer base]. We estimate that we have more than 5,000 hours a month for the programs that are volunteer hours. If you take a recreational specialist wage, which is hourly, that brings us to nearly \$60,000 a month that the volunteers provide for us. Over the [course of a] year, it's substantial. We want to continue to build that program, especially now with budget cuts being what they are.

LBBJ: What is the main revenue source for the department?

Chapjian: The main one, in terms of the General Fund, is the golf lease. We have other revenues from other agencies that we bring in – grants and those types of things. Our self-sustaining contract classes bring in a good amount of revenue. The charges for participating in activities, the rentals and the concessions – those are big revenue producers for us. Those are some of the major producers, [in addition to] El Dorado Park parking fees, meters in the parks and facility rentals. . . . We also have the mari-

na slip fees, which bring in a large amount of revenue, but those are not through the General Fund.

LBBJ: How do department revenues look for the rest of the year?

Chapjian: We're on track to meet the projected revenue goals. Of course, given the economy, they're not what they used to be. They're down a little bit from last year, but not that much.

LBBJ: What kind of impact, if any, would disbanding the Long Beach Redevelopment Agency have on the department?

Chapjian: I think, knowing the history of the redevelopment agency and what they've done here in Long Beach, it would be a tremendous impact. They've helped build a number of parks in the city that wouldn't have been built without their help. I think it's a key resource in terms of providing parks and recreation for citizens of Long Beach. Since I've been here, I've been involved in the groundbreaking of four parks. All were redevelopment agency projects, and we still have a number of them being completed in the north and central parts of the city. I'd hate to see redevelopment go away. I think the agency is a great partner for the parks. If I may add, I think that Long Beach has done it the right way. Other cities don't invest their redevelopment dollars into parks. It's always commercial investments. But I think Long Beach has a good balance, and they reinvest in community facilities.

LBBJ: What is the department doing now to prepare for projected revenue shortfalls next year?

Chapjian: We've identified reductions. We think we are going to provide the same amount of services with fewer dollars. We're constantly looking at efficiencies. Granted, some staff will be taking on more responsibility, and we are going to have to rely on our partnerships, but we know what we need to cut in terms of our budget. . . . It's tough. It's not easy, but I think we've got some truly dedicated staff [members] who go above and beyond. Normally, parks and recreation departments function with fewer dollars than a lot of other departments. We're accustomed to doing things the lean way.

LBBJ: Tell me about enrollment numbers for the department's recreational classes. Have there been any fluctuations this year versus last year?

Chapjian: We're actually seeing [an increase in] enrollment. People can't really afford to go on long vacations, so they're staying local and utilizing our programs, even signing up for the fee-based programs. We're seeing more people at our concerts in the parks [and] our movies in the parks. Those are free, family events. Given the economy, people are really appreciative of the fact that they can take their families to an event and not spend a lot of money. We even have free popcorn for them there.

We have five million active and passive participant contacts [coming in over the span of a year]. Here are some numbers. This year we've seen 700,000 youth and teens, 350,000 senior visits, 230,000 youth and adult sport participants, 320,000 aquatics visits to our pools and Leeway Sailing Center and had 145,000 nature visits.

LBBJ: Is that calendar year or fiscal year?

Chapjian: Fiscal year. Here's another number: 30,000 enrolled in contract classes. El Dorado [Park] has 190,000 vehicle entries, which is estimated to be about 700,000 visitors. We're a very active department.

LBBJ: Long Beach unemployment numbers went up last month. How might public space be used to help create jobs?

Chapjian: Well, we definitely have volunteer opportunities, and maybe that's something we expand to the unemployed. I'm not sure how we could help create jobs, but . . . we are doing more and more community gardens [and] more sustainable gardens. It's an

opportunity for people, if not employed, to participate, learn and get some experience in doing those sustainable gardens, zero-scaping, that type of thing. That seems to be the wave of the future – anything "green" – and those are green-related tasks and jobs. There could be some opportunity there.

We always employ youth. We're one of the biggest employers of youth during the summertime. We even have a program called Counselors In Training. The kids come in and actually pay us to learn how to become counselors. It's great because a lot of those kids go on to get jobs in other parts of our department or other recreation departments. We're always training kids. It's really important now because I think the youth unemployment rate is higher – like 30 percent, if I'm not mistaken. In the old days, you could walk into a McDonald's or one of the other fast-food places and get a part-time job right away. You can't do that anymore as a kid. Our jobs are important for [teaching] the kids how to get work, just the basics of being employed. It's important.

LBBJ: How important are public parks and recreational areas to the development of culture in Long Beach?

Chapjian: Our parks and our facilities are used all the time for cultural events because we have the space to accommodate large crowds. We have the facilities to accommodate a dance troupe or a poetry reading, and we actually have specific facilities for those. We're always involved in cultural events as a parks and recreation department. Without [us], I'm not sure what the [city's] cultural events would look like. We have a huge Cambodian event at El Dorado Park that accommodates thousands of people. We had the Civil War reenactment; that's cultural [because] it teaches people about that war. I think we're a key component in the cultural fabric of Long Beach.

LBBJ: Is the city doing a good job utilizing public space?

Chapjian: I think they're doing a very good job, compared to where I was. It's night and day in terms of utilization of space. All of our spaces are packed. We're constantly being asked for more space from people who want to use it, but we just don't have enough space. We have 160 parks, and that's still not enough. We're constantly looking into [creating] new parks. . . . Redevelopment always asked us, when they saw property, if we need it. They always ran it by us, but unfortunately we don't know what's going to happen with redevelopment. We'll have to wait and see.

LBBJ: Is there anything else you would like to discuss?

Chapjian: In the six months I've been here, there's [been] a lot going on in Long Beach. Long Beach is a very dynamic city. There are a variety of things to do here. I'm really proud of the fact that Long Beach has the Sea Festival and 100 Days of Summer. If you look at our Web site, you can find an activity for every day and they're all family based. It's a really neat place to be, not just in the summertime, but year round. There's always something to do.

This is a great department and there are a lot of great people in this department. There are a lot of good people in the overall city departments as well. In my opinion, in the six months I've been here, I think the citizens are served well by the staff. We're going to try to continue to be great. Yes, we're facing budget reductions, but we're going to take that as a challenge and opportunity to look at our core services – what are we doing well and what are we supposed to be doing – and then build on that. We're going to make sure we keep services for the kids who need it most. West, North and Central Long Beach are high priorities for us. ■