

Mayor Must Decide Harbor Commission Appointment – Or Is That Appointments?

Past Commissioners Say Business, Environmental Perspective Important

■ By **SEAN BELK**
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At least one seat is now open on the five-member Long Beach Harbor Commission after Mario Cordero left his post on May 31 to join the Federal Maritime Commission (FTC). Cordero, whose appointment was confirmed by the U.S. Senate, resigned with four years remaining on his term.

Additionally, Commissioner Mike Walter's term ends on June 30, but it hasn't been announced yet whether he will be reappointed to a second six-year term.

In accordance with the City Charter, each commissioner can serve a maximum of two six-year terms. The mayor nominates new commissioners and makes reappointments, while the Long Beach City Council confirms the appointments. Stacy Toda, spokesperson for Mayor Bob Foster, told the Business Journal the mayor will soon begin the process of reviewing applications.

Cordero, an accomplished workers' compensation lawyer and Long Beach City College political science professor, served eight years on the harbor commission after being appointed by former Mayor Beverly O'Neill in 2003 and reappointed by Mayor Foster in 2009. Walter, the executive assistant to the president of California State University, Long Beach and a business professor with a longtime international business background, was appointed to the commission by O'Neill in 2005.

Past commissioners said whomever Mayor Foster selects to take on either opening should come with a strong business background, while at the same time maintaining a viewpoint of environmental sensitivity.

"That's a position where a good business background is really important," said James Gray, chairman of Beach Business Bank and a harbor commission member from 1976 to 1987. "It is a huge world-wide business in the maritime transportation industry . . . Having said that, there's been huge strides in environmental sensitivity the port has done over the last few years."

Gray added that the position involves a sensitivity of the citizens of Long Beach, directly or indirectly affected by port operations, but commissioners also have to recognize the business community and the need for an economic engine by staying on the cutting edge in a highly competitive industry. "You need to have a caring and empathy-level from a citywide standpoint, but you can't do it in a vacuum without having a solid understanding of how a business is conducted," he said.

Further, he said understanding the complex international trade role the port has is also required. "One of the things that's very simple for people to overlook is the fact that you're dealing with people in a lot of different countries and cultures and everything that the port is involved in as a purveyor of trying to get trade to come through this port [rather than] Los Angeles, or Tacoma or wherever it might be," he said. "So I think that a business understanding

of the sensitivity of the cultures that you're dealing with is terribly important for anybody who's going to take on that responsibility."

John Hancock, president of Bancap Investment Group who served two full terms on the harbor commission, 1995 to 2007, said the job entails finance and marketing, while having the ability to blend and maintain a perspective between overseeing an independent port while keeping a relationship with the city.

He also agreed environmental sensitivity is key while keeping in mind the aspects of the business. "The port's made a lot of progress over a number of years," Hancock said. "I'm not advocating doing everything with total environmental dominance, but I'm just being practical."

Hancock said other obligations of the position are: to have a fair amount of time available to attend meetings, meet with port staff and be out in the public; recognizing both labor and basic business operations; and keeping a team approach to issues with port staff and other commissioners.

"The board is not there, in theory, to make every operational decision, although it's involved in reviewing a lot of them, but commissioners must take a team approach, amongst the employees of the port and amongst the harbor commission as well, and I think it's enjoyed that with few exceptions for a number of years," Hancock said.

It's the most coveted commission seat in Long Beach, noted Business Journal Publisher George Economides. He noted that up until the late-1990s, nearly all appointments were businesspeople, "usually individuals who had served in leadership roles in other groups such as the Long Beach Chamber, and who were considered go-to people when it came to major business decisions in the city.

"Then Mayor O'Neill sort of took a new approach and began appointing former public sector officials – a former city manager, city attorney and city councilperson – all individuals she knew for many years and trusted. She carried that on with the appointments of Cordero and Walter, both close associations of hers and both, like her, involved with education."

Foster's first appointment, Nick Sramek in 2007, was also a shift, Economides said, in that Sramek was a former community activist, deeply rooted in neighborhoods and the environment.

"If he makes one new appointment, I would hope it's a businessperson, preferably from the financial sector since that expertise is needed – a current or retired banker, accountant, financial advisor," Economides said. "If he makes two new appointments, someone involved in planning and/or environmental issues with a real estate background would certainly be an asset.

"Here's a wild card. How about Richard Steinke? He's retiring soon and who better to help guide the port for the next dozen years than the man who's led the way for the past dozen as executive director? There's no better candidate. That should stir the pot," Economides said. ■