

NEWS

New slate of concerts, venue upgrades to liven up Recreation Park bandshell



by Alicia Robinson

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Steve Pruitt, left, and Hans Hellsund stand at the Recreation Park bandshell in Long Beach near the corner of Seventh Street and Park Avenue Friday, July 14, 2023. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

Just about anyone who makes it to their 90s could probably use a little facelift, and the bandshell at Long Beach's [Recreation Park](#) is no exception.

Dedicated in 1929, the bandshell – with its stucco walls, terra cotta roof, decorative plasterwork and colorful Malibu tiles – is one of the city’s few Spanish Revival-style public buildings. And with its 100th birthday just a few years off, two longtime city residents are hoping to give it the makeover such a venerable old stalwart deserves.

Steve Pruitt and Hans Hellsund both live within walking distance of Recreation Park, both are involved with music (Hellsund as a guitarist and keyboard player and Pruitt as a sound guy), and both are retirees who were looking for somewhere to focus their energies.

Now the bandshell is that somewhere. The two men formed the Friends of Rec Park Bandshell (it’s under the umbrella of nonprofit Partners of Parks), and they’re hoping to put together a schedule of concerts and other events at the historic venue, and also to raise money to fix it up.

“Our mission is sort of two-fold: get this thing renovated and just get it into sort of a world-class venue that Long Beach can be super proud of and get good use out of it,” Hellsund said – while also giving local musicians a place to perform and providing entertainment for the community.

The effort was born when Pruitt realized that although he and his wife regularly walk by the bandshell on the way to the nearby baseball stadium, they’d only been to one event there in about 25 years.

Hellsund retired a few years ago from Pruitt’s company, a Seal Beach-based maker of sensors and data collection systems for product testing, and a few weeks ago, Pruitt sold the business and retired himself.

So, with a little more time on their hands, the two men started talking about putting on a few concerts at the bandshell (their kickoff event in June featured a popular Long Beach-based Rolling Stones cover band) and lining up a list of local performers in need of a stage.



Hans Hellsund, left, and Steve Pruitt sit on the stage of the Recreation Park bandshell in Long Beach near the corner of Seventh Street and Park Avenue Friday, July 14, 2023. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

Their long-term ambitions include organizing a jazz or blues festival, showing movies like “La La Land,” “Moulin Rouge” or “The Rocky Horror Picture Show” with a live band, and just having regular performances at the bandshell.

About 600 people showed up for the kickoff concert, Pruitt said, and “we’d love to see 1,000 people out here, or 2,000.”

But they also want to make the bandshell a better venue both for performers and for the audience. That will mean upgrading the old electrical system and lighting, touching up the paint and perhaps reimagining the seating (currently rows of wooden benches on concrete) and creating shade.

Other than some high school students volunteering to repaint the benches a few years ago, “there probably hasn’t been anything significant done to it in quite some time,” Long Beach Parks, Recreation and Marine Director Brent Dennis said.

Hellsund and Pruitt said a lawn area would be nice for picnicking during concerts, and Dennis said amphitheater-style seating like at Cesar Chavez Park is a possibility at Recreation Park, along with space for pop-up concessions or food trucks.

All those improvements will cost money, and that's what Pruitt and Hellsund are beating the bushes for now. They're hoping to hold some fundraising events and find corporate donations, and Dennis said grants and Measure A sales tax dollars could help.

Councilmember Kristina Duggan, whose district includes Recreation Park, is fully on board with the bandshell revitalization and is also looking for funding. The city has struggled to stop vandalism of the park restrooms, she said, and having more constructive activities in the park will help drive away less desirable ones.

"It's a beautiful park that just needs to be reengaged by providing more opportunities for people to enjoy it," Duggan said.

Upcoming events at the Recreation Park bandshell include a Long Beach student Battle of the Bands on Sept. 24, movie musicals on Thursday nights from Sept. 28 to Oct. 19 (movie selections TBA), and an Oct. 24 jazz festival.

For more information on upcoming events or how to support Friends of the rec park Bandshell, visit forpbs.org.



Local history: How Long Beach enthusiastically passed bond to buy Recreation Park in 1923

The city wanted to buy the land for Recreation Park but it would require a bond to be passed by voters to pay the \$642,925, and city leaders knew it would be a struggle to pass the bond issue by the required 4-1 margin in the June 15, 1923 election.

