

COMMUNITY

LONG BEACH

NEWS

These two friends are revitalizing one of Long Beach's historical landmarks

BY SAMANTHA DIAZ, MANAGING EDITOR · JUNE 29, 2023 · 5 MINUTE READ · ONE COMMENT



Steve Pruitt (left) and Hans Hellsund of the Friends of Recreation Park Bandshell pose for a picture while sitting on the edge of the nearly 100-year-old stage on June 12, 2023. (Richard H. Grant | Signal Tribune)

LONG BEACH TRANSIT

Get a bus pass to bus to class.

The image features the Long Beach Transit logo on the left, which consists of a stylized 'L' and 'T' inside a red square. To the right of the logo are two GoPass cards: one is orange with a palm tree and 'GoPass' text, and the other is blue with a red circle and 'tap' text. The background is a light, textured grey.

The bandshell at Recreation Park has gone through many iterations in its nearly 100-year history, being declared a historical landmark in 1991.

It started as a stage for bands and actors to perform. Then it was a place for temporary classrooms after the 1933 Long Beach earthquake, and in the 1940s, Richard Nixon gave a speech early in his political career in front of the stark, curved arch and intricate tiled borders.

But now most days the elaborate central arch, ornately decorated pillars and maroon-colored stage sit empty, as do the rows and rows of aqua-green benches facing it.

Two friends and local music supporters want to change that.

Steve Pruitt and Hans Hellsund, both Long Beach residents, are breathing life back into the bandshell and hoping to “return it to its glory days,” Pruitt said. It won’t be easy, given the plants growing out of its crevices, cracked paint, broken windows and faded tiles.



Foliage grows out of the some of moluding on the facade of the Recreation Park Band Shell. (Richard H. Grant | Signal Tribune)



A skateboarder jumps down the stairs of the Recreation Park Band Shell on June 12, 2023.
(Richard H. Grant | Signal Tribune)

Hellsund and Pruitt started their nonprofit organization, Friends of Recreation Park Bandshell (FORPBS), in 2022 to revitalize the stage and accompanying building.

While the stage and benches are often used by skaters and people who need a place to rest, the duo hopes to transform the underused and underappreciated bandshell into a mecca for local talent, live music, theater and education.

The two said they've driven past the bandshell for years, often wondering why such a perfect location for live music and performances goes unused. Since retiring from the same sound engineering company, the friends have devoted their time to giving it a sense of pride.

“It was a good fit for us to give something back to the community and seeing this stage, it’s just not used and it’s an amazing facility ... We’re trying to give it a sense of ownership.”

-Steve Pruitt, co-founder of Friends of Recreation Park Bandshell

There’s enough room for 600 people on the benches (even more on the grass), a raised stage framed by a 1920’s Spanish Baroque Revival style arch covered in colorful mosaic

tiles and perhaps most importantly, one of the city's largest and newest playgrounds is within shouting distance.



An aerial view of children playing before a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the reopening of the Recreation Park Playground on June 14, 2022. The Recreation Park bandshell can be seen in the upper left corner, close enough for parents to watch their children from the benches. (Richard H. Grant | Signal Tribune)



A model dinosaur is being worked on by construction workers. The dinosaur will have its grand reopening at the Recreation Park Playground. (Richard H. Grant | Signal Tribune)

The bandshell was constructed in the 1920's, though there's no date confirmed, according to the city's [website](#). The stage and building's last update was in 1995 to provide structural integrity to meet earthquake standards.

The bandshell used to have arbors, shade provided by woodwork and climbing plants or trees, and the City had plans to replace those arbors but couldn't find the funds, according to the city's [website](#).

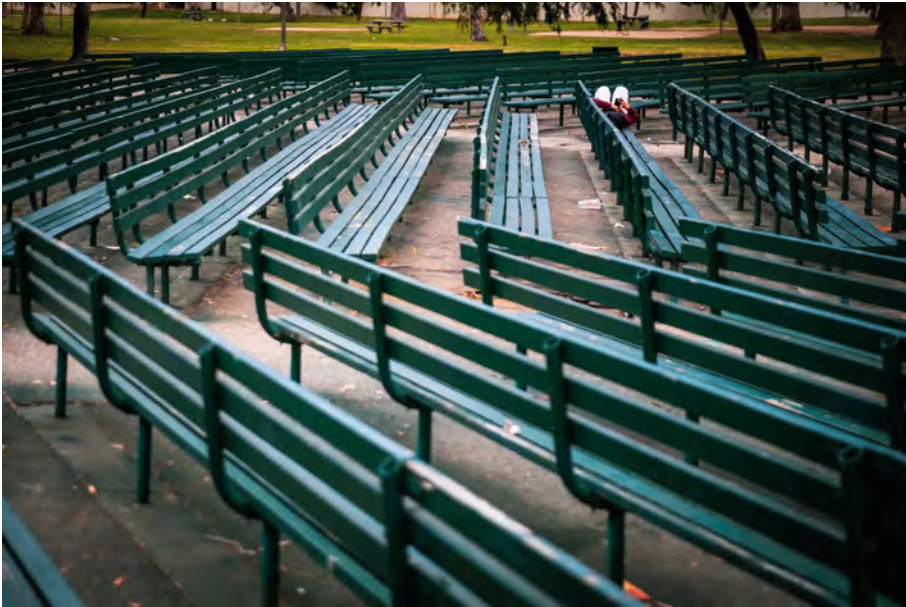
FORPBS functions under Partners of Parks, the nonprofit branch of the Long Beach Parks, Recreation and Marine Department.

Pruitt said the next step is to have someone inspect what updates are needed on the bandshell, building and benches. So far, they can tell the bandshell and building needs a new coat of paint, plumbing, electrical wiring, additional lighting and probably more.

"It's functional, but extremely rough," Pruitt said. "It looks like nothing's been done to it for 50 years."



A view of the facade of the Recreation Park Bandshell in Long Beach on June 12, 2023. (Richard H. Grant | Signal Tribune)



A woman lays on one of the benches at the Recreation Park Bandshell and browses on her phone on June 12, 2023. (Richard H. Grant | Signal Tribune)

Since the bandshell is a historical landmark, restrictions are in place regarding what they can change, though Pruitt and Hellsund both said they wouldn't consider changing the design.

FORPBS has already hosted three events at the bandshell in the past month in an effort to remind people of the possibilities. Pruitt said that with each event, people share memories of the bandshell with them, ranging from concerts in the '70s to high school graduations and summer camp meet-ups.

The two performed at the kick-off music festival at the bandshell on June 4, Hellsund on stage and Pruitt handling the production.

"It's such a massive stage. It's unbelievable how big it is," Hellsund said, noting that like most other amateur bands, he's used to playing in cramped spaces.



An overhead view of the band shell and seating area at Recreation Park on June 12, 2023. (Richard H. Grant | Signal Tribune)

They're hoping that local talent will soon see the bandshell for what it is: an ideal jumping point to create a live music scene in Long Beach, as well as a free place for youth to showcase their talent through concerts and plays.

Next on the fundraising and word-spreading schedule is a Long Beach Student Battle of the Bands contest, where local high school students will be invited to enter a musical contest. Bands don't need to have an affiliation with their school, but school-ran ensembles will also be able to perform.

Since Pruitt is a seasoned sound engineer, he said he hopes to teach people who are interested in learning the technical side of putting on a show. Pruitt said if any high school students want to learn and help produce the Battle of the Bands contest, they can reach out to FORPBS.

Hellsund said they are also planning a Blues Festival sometime in the fall. Along with events, Pruitt said that the group is interested in working with local high school bands to host their performances, as the bandshell did in the past.

The nonprofit is actively accepting volunteers and donations through its website forpbs.org. People can fill out a form on the site to volunteer, become a patron or perform at the bandshell or email forpbs.org@gmail.com.

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BY RICHARD H. GRANT, PHOTO EDITOR · JUNE 14, 2022

