

[Request Service](#)[Service Guide/FAQ's](#)[Recreation
Classes & Programs](#)[Job Opportunities](#)

CITY HALL

Hours & Contact Info

Search...

Search

5050 Clark Avenue, Lakewood CA, 90712 - 562-866-9771 voice, 562-866-0505 fax

[Homepage](#) > [News](#) > News Details[Return](#)

News Details

Lakewood: The city as new as tomorrow 1949-1959



The time was 1949. The Greatest Generation returned from war. They were eager to begin new lives . . . no longer directed and shaped by the rigors of wartime. It was time for a new more peaceful life. Thousands, who had experienced the climate of southern California while working, training or in transit during wartime, would now elect to make this their home.

Twenty-five miles south of Los Angeles and immediately adjacent to Long Beach, approximately 3,500 acres of mostly bean fields--known only for cattle grazing and crop farming--caught the attention of three enterprising developers.

This is the story of that land and the people who pioneered the future city of Lakewood on that land.

Our story is in three parts. This program is about the beginning years--from 1949 through the late-1950s.

Future programs cover Lakewood from the late-50's through the end of the 20th century . . . and our capstone program is about the traditions and future of Lakewood.

The three developers . . . Ben Weingart, Louis Boyer and Mark Taper . . . purchased this land. Moved by a combination of hard-headed business sense, tinged with a degree of idealism intended to satisfy the hunger for a home and the comforts of family life felt by tens of thousands of new residents, they formed the Lakewood Park Corporation in partnership with the Prudential Insurance Company . . .

Orphaned at age four and adopted by a sharecropper family in Georgia, Ben Weingart set out westward on his own at fifteen. He was almost eighteen when he arrived in Los Angeles in 1906, landing a job with the Diamond Laundry Company delivering laundry to downtown hotels. He eventually got into the hotel business--managing and later owning more than 200 hotels and apartment buildings.

Ben Weingart's primary role in the Lakewood Park Corporation was to obtain financing for the entire development project.

His long association with and affection for the city can be seen today in the many public facilities made possible by the Weingart Foundation: The Centre at Sycamore Plaza, the William Burns community service center, the Weingart-Lakewood Family YMCA and the

Weingart senior center.

Louis Boyar was a man with a vision. The owner of Aetna Construction Inc., which built homes for defense workers during WWII, he worked on his plan for nearly ten years-- envisioning rows of houses with corner strip-malls within walking distance, schools, parks and places for religious worship. It would become the nation's largest post-war planned community.

Boyar joined up with Ben Weingart and was named president of the development corporation. He was in charge of overseeing all of the construction.

Mark Taper was brought into the project and named vice-president of the corporation. His reputation for the successful construction of large tracts of housing in the Los Angeles area helped to secure the initial financing from Prudential. His company, Biltmore Construction, along with Boyar's, brought together the pooling of labor and equipment needed for the massive project.

The new company soon began construction of over 17,000 new homes for a new class of homeowners--GI Bill educated, World War II veterans . . . The demand for housing required a frantic pace of construction. With an astounding goal of at least 50 housing starts each day . . .

Wartime mass production techniques were put to use. An assembly line of workers put together door and window frames . . . to be delivered daily to the construction site along with other components. Because of production efficiencies--for every ten foundations poured--enough concrete was saved to build the eleventh.

Teams of carpenters hammered together the wood frames. Fresh plaster was laid on the walls by one crew . . . to be smoothed out a few minutes later by another crew. Special conveyor equipment brought shingles to the roofers. Thousands of houses arose from the ground, in accordance with a master plan for a "dream city" designed by Louis Boyar.

Boyar's dream city was built around Ben Weingart's vision of California's first mega mall. In fact, the world's largest shopping center at that time . . .

- The large shopping area specially designed for the automobile.
- Landscaped parkway panels separated residential streets from major highways.
- Community parks were planned throughout the tract.

Everything about the new community was larger, bolder, and newer than anyone had seen before. Labeled by Time Magazine as the "largest housing development in the world," they reported as many as "30,000 people stampeded one day" for the sale of houses in Lakewood Park.

Thanks in large part to the availability of federal low interest, no down payment loans offered veterans, the newly built unincorporated area of southern California had, by early 1953, become a thriving residential community of more than 80,000 residents.

Governed by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, Lakewood residents yearned for local self-government. The residents of Lakewood faced a series of decisions. Essentially, they had three choices:

- They could remain an unincorporated county territory comprised mostly of homes with no industry and only property taxes to sustain local public services . . . exclusively provided by county agencies.
- They could accept annexation by the older, larger and once oil-rich Long Beach and become a district in that nearby city.

-- Or, they could assume the responsibilities of incorporation and become an independent municipality with control over their own destiny. Although each solution had its proponents, the idea of local control through incorporation gained momentum when Long Beach city leaders attempted to annex Lakewood neighborhood by neighborhood in what was essentially a "hostile takeover" attempt.

To defeat the annexation approach, opponents formed the Lakewood Civic Council. Petitions were circulated among property owners in affected neighborhoods protesting the annexation vote.

Eventually, all but one of the annexation battles was defeated, some by vote and others by protest. Yet, the threat remained. And, the annexation of the Lakewood Village area showed that the Lakewood community could be seized one at a time by Long Beach.

Incorporation as a self-governed city seemed the only logical alternative.

However, with no industry and only property taxes to pay for existing municipal services provided by the county, higher and higher property taxes were forecast for a new city. Long Beach interests predicted that an impoverished Lakewood city government would provide inferior services or ruinous taxation.

Much of the campaign against Lakewood cityhood consisted of half-truths and unsubstantiated rumors. Cityhood supporters informed voters that Lakewood, by remaining unincorporated, would never benefit from state-collected retail sales taxes shared only with cities and counties.

Opponents were right about a new city's ability to generate the type of revenues used by established cities for providing municipal work forces. Lakewood's share of new city revenues would only be enough if the proposed city could find new, lower cost ways of providing city services. Only an economical city government could succeed.

To unite Lakewood residents in supporting incorporation, the innovative concept of retaining county services through contracts was introduced.

Many of the key points in favor of incorporation were advocated by John Todd, a young lawyer in private practice . . . who was to become Lakewood's first City Attorney . . . and incidentally the only City Attorney well into the next century.

When John Todd showed how the county services residents were already receiving could be retained--while keeping taxes low--many who favored remaining unincorporated joined forces with those campaigning for incorporation.

MUSIC: TRANSITIONAL

On March 9, 1954, the voters, by a 3 to 2 margin, approved incorporation--and a few weeks later on April 16, 1954 . . . a new city was born!

Lakewood . . . instantly the 16th largest city in California . . . and the first city in Los Angeles County to incorporate in 15 years!

Also decided in the same election were the members of Lakewood's first City Council . . .

Robert W. Baker, William J. Burns, Gene Nebeker, George Nye, Jr. and Angelo M. Iacoboni, who was selected by the City Council to be the city's first mayor.

Angelo Iacoboni, a navigator on a U.S Navy attack transport, graduated from Harvard Law School and became a Lakewood resident in 1948. He joined an alliance of residents who were opposed to having Lakewood annexed by Long Beach and who promoted incorporation. A

practicing local attorney, he served on the city council until his sudden death at age 46, in 1964. The Angelo M. Iacoboni public library is named in his honor.

Gene Nebeker served in the United States Air Force and was also one of the organizers for Lakewood's fight for incorporation. A realtor by profession, he was a founder of the Lakewood Junior Chamber of Commerce and an active civic leader. Robert Baker was in the Coast Guard during the war. An electrical engineer, he served on the city council for nearly two decades. While mayor in the mid-60s, he initiated the use of helicopters in law enforcement to patrol the city 24 hours a day. It was the nation's first helicopter surveillance program. He died in 2002.

George Nye Jr., an Army Air Force pilot, was an artist and educator who designed the seal for the newly incorporated city. The seal showed Douglas MacArthur School, St. Pancratius Church, a young boy playing ball, and his own home, all superimposed on the original boundaries of Lakewood. The city seal was at the time the only square shaped one in the United States. George Nye, Jr. served on the council until his death in 1971.

William J. Burns, a newspaper reporter, served as a Special Agent with the FBI during the war and retired from the U.S. Army Reserve with the rank of major. He worked with the original Lakewood incorporation committee and served on the council until 1972.

Lakewood quickly became known as "Tomorrow's City Today" . . . and for good reason:

The first City Council immediately implemented the highly innovative Contract Plan--a unique concept of providing basic public services while keeping both taxes and city expenses low through a series of contracts with county agencies and private firms.

John Todd's vision of contracting city services as a cost-effective and flexible form of municipal government would become known as the "Lakewood Plan." Lakewood was called "the city without a payroll." An exaggeration for sure, but a valid comparison with all other city governments that exclusively relied upon city employees for almost all services.

Under the Lakewood Plan, the City Council establishes policy, enacts legislation, hires the City Manager and City Attorney, adopts the municipal budget providing public services, adopts city laws known as ordinances and oversees community planning and land use controls.

In the beginning years of cityhood, almost all city services were provided by contract with the county. In the ensuing years--as the city grew and interest in new services grew dramatically--the Lakewood Plan has evolved. Private enterprise provides contract services as well as other governmental entities.

The Lakewood Plan experiment is so successful that it was copied by other new cities in Los Angeles County--for the next fifty years.

Included among the many services contracted out to other governmental agencies--most notably LA County—are . . . law enforcement . . . road repair . . . and building inspection.

Private companies provide many services to Lakewood including . . . trash collection . . . street light operation . . . street sweeping . . . computer systems management . . . traffic signal maintenance . . . helicopter maintenance . . . janitorial services . . . parkway and median mowing . . . and street tree maintenance.

Non-profit agencies provide other important services such as . . . animal control . . . senior nutrition . . . human services and health programs.

Additional non-contract services are provided through special districts, for example . . . fire protection and paramedics . . . libraries . . . flood control . . . sanitation . . . and mosquito abatement. It should be noted that City Attorney John Todd, now known as the "Father of the Lakewood Plan" of contracting services, had been right. Contracting for services could

make a "real city"--with all the strengths of community identity and neighborhood values.

Critics of the Lakewood Plan called Lakewood a partial services or "phantom city." But, critics couldn't fool the young residents of Lakewood--building, volunteering, working, and planning with their new city government--that Lakewood was a "phantom."

The year is 1955. Lakewood is growing. There is a need for planning future development and improving infrastructure.

After many years of lobbying state legislators, cities begin receiving a share of state-collected retail sales taxes.

Lakewood is able to maintain one of the lowest local property tax rates in comparable California cities.

In 1956, Lakewood adopted a city Master Plan for Development and Zoning . . . and began to landscape the medians along major city streets. Confident of the new city's economic future, voters in 1957 authorized Lakewood to borrow \$6.6 million . . . to purchase the Lakewood Water and Power Company.

At the same time, voters also approved bringing the self-governing Lakewood Park, Recreation and Parkway District into the city's jurisdiction. That led to a remarkable day in 1957 when the city council and the new recreation commission dedicated three new parks . . . each named for a patriot of South American liberation in recognition of the city's annual Pan American Festival.

By the end of the 1950s, Lakewood had evolved a government structure destined to successfully weather the challenges of the next generation.

The biggest challenge?

New pressures for additional services due to a dramatic rise in population with increasing numbers of young people. What had begun as an experiment in community building and self-government at the beginning of the 1950s . . . would continue to flourish in the city's following decades. The hopeful promise of Lakewood was being realized in quiet, safe streets, bustling shopping centers, and a booming aerospace economy.

Optimism . . . is a good note for us to leave on--till we return with parts II and III of our history.

Optimism indeed . . . for the first ten years of birth and growth of Lakewood never would have happened without optimism and the contributions of the founding leaders of Lakewood . . . and the people who followed them.