

Signal Hill Still Booming at 90

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Brittany Woolsey, April 19, 2014

Keaton King remembers when the discovery of oil fueled Signal Hill's revenue. Back then, in the 1920s, the city wasn't so much of a residential town as it was a hub for the oil industry.

"There were some restaurants and a couple of little stores on Cherry (Avenue) and Willow (Street)," King said. "The rest of it was all pipe and machine parts and pumps. There was also a junkyard full of parts, and people came from all over the world to get parts for pumps and other things they needed."

King, 89, a former Signal Hill mayor, is sharing his 90th birthday this year with the city.

The city struck oil following a failed attempt by the Union Oil Co. Further exploration was suspended until the Royal Dutch Shell Oil Co. achieved a gusher at Alamitos Well No. 1, according to the city.

Before oil was discovered in 1921, houses were being built on the hilltop akin to a Beverly Hills-type feel, said local historian Ken Davis. Construction was halted after the oil was discovered, and Signal Hill's founding fathers voted for incorporation on April 22, 1924.

Long Beach was looking to annex the area for a utility tax for the oil, said Davis, a member of the Signal Hill Historical Society. The people who owned the land wanted to incorporate on their own.

Hundreds of oil derricks occupied the hill, then known as Porcupine Hill.

Davis said that in those days, Signal Hill was lightly populated with some agricultural surroundings. Most of the housing was small cottages for the oil workers.

"It wasn't really a bedroom community in those days," Davis said.

Signal Hill Petroleum, which moved into the city in 1984, has maintained a relationship that has helped the city thrive, said Councilwoman Lori Woods.

"They have helped attract and develop residential homes, restaurants, retail centers, grocery stores all creatively and safely in and around the challenges of abandoned oil wells and alongside producing wells," she said.

The city is now a booming place for business. It's attracted eight auto dealerships and retail stores like Costco.

Mayor Edward Wilson said he believes the city is business-friendly, and that residents are also happy.

“We have a lot to be proud of,” he said. “Our Police Department is great, and the fact that we built a new Police Department is awesome. We’re also really proud of our schools.”

The city has three elementary schools, one middle school and seven preschools within the Long Beach Unified School District.

King said residents of Signal Hill are at an advantage because the taxes are lower than they are in Long Beach, and, because of the city’s small size, they have a little more control over city functions.

“The 90th anniversary just proves that we’ve been doing things right in Signal Hill, and the people are happy,” he said.

Of course, not everyone is happy, and some want even more tax control.

A measure called the Taxpayers’ Right to Know and Vote, if approved by voters in the June 3 election, would amend the city charter and require the council to set special or general elections for some increases in taxes, fees, assessments and charges.

Each tax increase would require approval by two-thirds of voters.

City officials oppose the measure and say it would tie their hands, making it more difficult to raise tax revenue.

Real estate also has been a boon for the city.

Signal Hill boasts some of the most expensive homes in the area, with some houses on top of the hill, which overlooks Long Beach, costing around \$1.5 million. These 450 homes are also relatively new, with construction taking place between 1998 and 2002.

The hill isn’t just for residents, however. Visitors frequent the hilltop park for yoga classes, walks and just to enjoy the view.

King, who grew up in Long Beach before moving to Signal Hill in 1957, served on the Signal Hill City Council in separate terms from 1972 to 1982.

During his time on the council, the city established its Redevelopment Agency, which dissolved in 2011 with other such agencies statewide.

Wilson said one of the city's biggest accomplishments was its use of redevelopment funds, which allowed cities to hold back property tax from the state to target blighted areas in need of revitalization.

"We used redevelopment well with the auto mall and Costco," he said. "There's a lot of things that we did. How we go forward with that is going to be the issue."

Woods said the city should be proud of maintaining an identity apart from Long Beach.

She said that's not easy when a city is surrounded by another city and is only about 2.2 square miles.

"Things don't often happen quickly here on The Hill, but when they do happen, they are a great and long-lasting success," she said. "From a community covered by hundreds of oil derricks in the 1930s and 1940s to the pleasant, distinctive gem it is today, is truly an amazing accomplishment."

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