

## **2021 – A Truly Momentous Year for Imperial Beach, With Much More to Come**

As Mayor Pro Tem and the Dean of the Imperial Beach City Council (longest serving member), I can say without doubt that 2021 was historically one of the most significant years of Council decision making for the benefit of the community. Some results have already occurred, but most will see implementation in 2022 and 2023.

Yet there is much more to address in 2022 that will also have both immediate and future benefits for our beloved beach community.

**Community Services.** For the first time in nearly a decade, the city now has a Recreation Department, thanks to a variety of funding sources that include Measure I for annual recurring expenses like staff and one-time funds from the Federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). The City has a new and outstanding Recreation Director and plans to renovate all areas of the Sports Park (particularly but not only the gym) and to transform the City-owned facility at 170 Palm into a recreation and community services hub.

The City Council also approved important renovations for the Senior Center, while grant funds are being sought to replace the existing buildings, and improvements at Veterans Park, including a splash pad. The soccer field will get artificial turf and be placed under Rec Department management so that it will mainly serve the IB community. I should add that all of these Council decisions, and those under other topics below, were made at public meetings with ample internal Council debate and public input.

**Response to Covid Pandemic.** In 2020 Imperial Beach was among the first cities in the county to declare an emergency and create a Mayor's Covid Task Force covering all major health, business and city operational and financial areas. We delegated authority to the City Manager to take various actions, enabling the City to procure software and equipment so staff could work efficiently from home, get testing and then a vaccine center set up with County assistance, institute hiring freezes and other actions to reduce spending as City revenue fell, and allow business more flexibility to operate outdoors. These and other measures allowed public services to continue and maintained a balanced budget, unlike many other cities in the State. As a result, we were able to begin restoring budgetary reserves this year.

**New Projects.** The City Council reviewed and approved a number of key new projects that will benefit community members, visitors, and city finances. Public projects include completion of planned alley paving and street lighting throughout the community, and improvements to Reama Park and Teeple Park. The City Council also debated and approved the Pizza Port project on Old Palm and well-designed commercial and mixed use projects on Seacoast Drive. These projects should be completed by 2023.

**Cross Border Pollution.** Imperial Beach's leadership of a coalition of parties advocating for solutions on both sides of the border seems to be paying off. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) began to develop options about two years ago and is now supporting a comprehensive multi-project approach costing close to \$700 Million, including expanded and new wastewater treatment plants, which should reduce beach closure days by 70-80%. The City

Council received a detailed public briefing on the subject in November as well as a closed session update with the attorneys representing the City and working with lawyers from the Port, the State and other entities in the coalition. The effort has required both legal action and advocacy at all levels, including Washington, D.C. and IB Mayor Serge Dedina deserves great credit for his leadership and tireless efforts.

**Housing and Density.** Imperial Beach and other California Cities face growing pressures from the State legislature to produce more affordable housing, even though the same legislature several years ago under then Governor Brown, stripped cities of the tax-increment funding that helped cities finance affordable housing locally. Recent legislation, for example, requires cities to allow accessory dwelling units (ADU's or "granny flats") and authorizes residential property owners to split their lots without city approval, potentially quadrupling density in single family zoned areas.

In response, the City Council is legally challenging the SANDAG housing quota allocation of over 1300 new units to IB (4 times more than previously), along with three other similarly affected cities in the county. The Council is also requiring offsite parking for new ADUs within 3 blocks of the beach, so that residents and visitors are not adversely affected by this legislation.

**City Financial Picture.** One of the key financial challenges facing the City has been the cost of the contract with the Sheriff, the largest item in the IB budget, and its annual 5 to 6% escalation. Ironically, the Council's Law Enforcement Review Committee process drew attention to this unsustainable financial situation leading eventually to a recent reduction to a 1% escalation in 2023 and 2024 followed by 3% in the next two years.

Meanwhile, Measure I revenues have begun to make up for lower sales tax revenues from most businesses during the shutdown period of the pandemic, while property tax revenue has grown along with property values and general sales tax revenues have more recently begun to exceed pre pandemic levels.

The new Development Agreement with March & Ash, which should open in January, will provide \$1.5m to the City and long term revenue of 7% of their gross revenue. These funds can be utilized for public education regarding cannabis use and monitoring of any impacts, as well as other uses that benefit the public.

The City also has completed a new 10-year agreement with the Port for reimbursement of services provided in and adjacent to Port properties in IB.

**Next Year and Beyond.** With the new recreation programs and facilities now funded on a sustainable basis, plus the strong city budget just discussed, IB looks really good going into 2022. There will be a good deal of construction taking place in connection with the items we approved this year. In addition, the city will be completing the updating of our 20+ year old General Plan and our outdated Local Coastal Plan (LCP), two key overlapping policy documents that will involve a good amount of public input.

Now that IB is recognized as a wonderful residential *and* visitor serving gem, we need to better define where we want to be in 10 to 20 years. My hope is that these planning efforts will help IB leaders and residents take the future into our own hands in part by building on older planning documents like the 2005 Ecotourism Study and the 2000 Big Picture strategy document, and by developing new plans for the future consistent with where we are now.

These should include much needed improvements to our main community and visitor serving area, the Seacoast Drive Commercial Zone, which includes Old Palm from Third Avenue westward. To fulfill its potential to be a walkable and active area both day and night, wider sidewalks and better lighting are needed. The new businesses that have been approved, plus the eventual development of the IB Resorts property, suggest that at a minimum we should plan for easy and safe pedestrian access from Pizza Port to IB Resorts.

Public investment in this area will support existing and future private investment in services that will benefit IB residents, increase tax revenues and support our increasingly visitor serving economy. Exciting times lie ahead for Imperial Beach. I believe that careful planning can both achieve sustainable growth in services and revenue while preserving the essential family-oriented classic beach community feel we all cherish.

Let's all work together to make 2022 the best ever for Imperial Beach.

Sincerely,

Ed Spriggs, Mayor Pro Tem

Imperial Beach