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# NEWPORT BEACH

## Harbor Commission Staff Report

January 14, 2026  
Agenda Item No. 6.6

**TO:** HARBOR COMMISSION

**FROM:** Paul Blank, Harbormaster  
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**TITLE:** Harbormaster Update – November and December 2025 Activities

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### **ABSTRACT:**

The Harbormaster oversees the City Harbor Department and is responsible for the management of the City's mooring fields and Balboa Yacht Basin marina, support for the Harbor Commission, municipal code enforcement on the harbor, events and marine activities permitting, safety and rescue operations, management of the Marina Park visitor serving marina, marine sanitation pump out equipment and public pier maintenance, water quality monitoring and maintenance, impound and disposition of abandoned and unclaimed vessels and public relations and information dissemination on and about Newport Harbor as well as several special projects.

This report will update the Harbor Commission and the public on the Harbor Department's recent activities.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

- 1) Determine this action is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Sections 15060(c)(2) and 15060(c)(3) of the CEQA Guidelines because this action will not result in a physical change to the environment, directly or indirectly; and
- 2) Receive and file.

### **FUNDING REQUIREMENTS:**

There is no fiscal impact related to this item.

### **DISCUSSION:**

The Harbor Department is pleased to provide the following summary of departmental activities for November and December 2025. The report is organized by the department's mission of keeping Newport Harbor **CLEAN, SAFE, and WELL-ENJOYED.**

## Clean

Significant efforts were expended to maintain and improve the cleanliness of the harbor, particularly given multiple weather events and increased winter storm activity.

Highlights included:

- Continued containment and remediation of multiple abandoned and distressed vessels, including ongoing monitoring of deployed containment booms at a residential property affected by an oil well leak. Booms remain in place at the request of the Utilities Department and are inspected regularly.
- Numerous vessel dewatering responses across public docks, private docks, moorings, and anchorage areas during and following significant rainfall events. Courtesy notifications were issued to vessel owners emphasizing the importance of monitoring vessels during inclement weather.
- Investigation and follow-up on fuel and oil discharges, including a significant case involving a vessel assigned to a mooring in the J Field, which required mechanical inspection, fuel system evaluation, and coordination with contractors.
- Hazmat responses in multiple harbor locations, including Promontory Bay and the J Mooring Field, with successful source identification and enforcement follow-up where contractor actions were determined to be the cause.
- Addressed multiple bird infestation cases on moored vessels and coordinated corrective action with owners.
- Removal and mitigation of submerged and partially submerged vessels presenting environmental and navigational hazards, including impounded vessels with attached motors and gear.
- Annual inspections of permitted liveaboard vessels were carried out.
- Expansion of routine trash skimmer checks to include a fourth skimmer, improving debris capture throughout the harbor.
- Conversion planning continued for City moorings to helical ground tackle systems, with engineering support engaged to update mooring specifications for future Commission consideration.

## Safe

Significant efforts were expended to maintain and improve the safety of the harbor, with an emphasis focused on navigation safety, infrastructure integrity, and code compliance. Highlights included:

- Ongoing navigation light enforcement, including nighttime operations, to ensure vessels were properly illuminated.
- Significant off-season maintenance and upgrades to all four patrol vessels, including engine replacement, fuel line improvements, hydraulic system upgrades, and the development of a new preventive maintenance program and pre-departure checklist.
- Coordination of vessel relocations and buoy repositioning to accommodate the Balboa Yacht Basin and Lower Bay dredging projects, including temporary movement of anchorage boundary buoys and race marks.
- Response to infrastructure issues such as broken docks, floats, pilings, and inoperable pumpout equipment, with coordination across City departments and contractors.
- Vessel safety inspections resulted in several vessels failing inspection due to deficiencies in navigation lights and required equipment.
- Enforcement actions addressing vessels anchored in navigation channels, unauthorized mooring use, and unsafe recreational activity, including paddleboarders without required personal flotation devices.
- Proactive severe-weather monitoring through contracted assistance during periods when Harbor staff were not on duty.

### **Well-enjoyed**

Significant efforts were expended to maintain and improve the enjoyment of the harbor while minimizing impacts to safety and navigation. Highlights included:

- Extensive coordination and operational support for the Christmas Boat Parade, including enforcement of unpermitted charter activity and monitoring of anchorage use during peak activity.
- Ongoing education of anglers and recreational users regarding fishing regulations, best management practices, and appropriate use areas, including updated signage at all public docks to comply with California angling laws.
- Engagement with the U.S. Coast Guard regarding evolving charter vessel regulations affecting Newport Harbor.
- Enforcement actions involving repeat offenders and unpermitted commercial operations, including vessel impoundments, administrative citations, and coordination with new subscription investigative tools to identify ownership and business activity.

## Odds and Ends

Significant efforts were expended to address harbor-related matters other than cleanliness, safety, and enjoyment. Highlights included:

- At the request of the State Lands Commission, an analysis of mooring transfer transactions and sales prices reported revealed \$715K in profits realized since 2017 and an average profit of 52% across all transfer transactions where there is data on the same mooring transferring more than once.
- A training program was initiated based on a new Harbor Safety Officer Qualification Handbook. Field application of the new handbook has involved anchor training (deployment and retrieval) so far, with much more to come.
- With support from peer harbors, peer marinas, and Risk Management, we're reviewing insurance requirements for marina guests.
- We met with the USCG PSU (Port Security Unit) and communicated about their current focus. We expect to see more camo-wearing Coasties and Reservists assigned to our area to backfill active-duty assignments, primarily drug interdiction, but also conducting recreational boat boardings.
- A review of recent SAVE Grant recipients revealed that the only other agency in Orange County to receive an award was Oceanside, and they only got \$8K. The LA County Sheriff got \$44.5K, Redondo and Long Beach got \$50K each. San Diego Fire and San Diego Port each got \$65K. Everyone else was up north, meaning that of the \$1MM available, 38% was awarded to agencies in the south and 62% was awarded to agencies in the north of the state. The only other agencies, besides Newport, to receive the maximum award were Richardson's Bay and the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office.
- We engaged an engineer to support the update of mooring specs and overhaul requirements to include helical anchor systems. The proposed updated specifications and requirements will come to HC for approval.
- A vessel sank and was abandoned at Moonstone Cove, Catalina. We were asked for advice and resources on how to abate the situation. The area is not within Avalon's jurisdiction. Neither the Island Company nor the Catalina Conservancy indicated they could help. The USCG removed HAZMATs from the vessel. It appears the upland tenant in that cove may take action and was advised to ask for support from the LA County Sheriff (see note above on SAVE

Grant recipients).

- A summary of surrendered and abandoned vessels removed from the harbor was prepared in response to comments from a well-meaning but underinformed constituent. The response included:

Here's a summary of all the abandoned or surrendered boats removed from Newport Harbor since I became Harbormaster:

	Vessels	Total	Average	High	Low
Year	Removed	Costs	by Vessel	Vessel	Vessel
2020	4	\$ 19,175.00	\$4,793.75	\$ 8,600.00	\$ 2,075.00
2021	42	\$160,022.50	\$3,810.06	\$27,500.00	\$ 200.00
2022	6	\$ 39,450.00	\$6,575.00	\$16,000.00	\$ 1,400.00
2023	24	\$147,585.00	\$6,149.38	\$19,500.00	\$ 625.00
2024	32	\$175,392.50	\$5,481.02	\$25,327.50	\$ 1,500.00
2025	5	\$ 16,825.00	\$3,365.00	\$ 6,650.00	\$ 1,500.00
Totals		113 \$ 558,450.00	\$ 5,029.03	\$ 27,500.00	\$ 200.00

Although the removal numbers demonstrate that we have made meaningful progress—often at significant cost to taxpayers—we continue to see vessels enter Newport Harbor that are likely to be abandoned or surrendered in the future. The good news is that Newport Beach has the laws and resources in place to address these situations before they become major hazards.

- We are investigating schools for marine mechanics and will consider sending members of the department as we strive to become more self-sufficient, reduce outside costs, and reduce downtime for the patrol boats.
- An excellent survey of the San Diego Harbor Entrance was conducted by the Harbormaster and Deputy Harbormaster. The situation includes boats in various stages of deterioration anchored just outside the harbor entrance and five currently submerged on the rocks/jetty. Neither the Port of San Diego nor the City of San Diego seems to be doing anything about it. We are fortunate here in Newport that forward-thinking people, working 20 or so years ago, put laws/codes/regulations in place that make it hard for such problems to develop. Subsequently, resources were allocated that could actually enforce the laws. We can't always prevent the situation from developing here, but when it does, we address and remediate it very quickly.

The most gratifying email of the month came from a constituent praising us for installing Coast Guard-approved lighting on various Private Aids to Navigation (PATONs) around

the harbor and asking about the project origins and progress. The response also met with praise. Here's a digest:

- An Eagle Scout project that placed LEDs on some of the PATONs was authorized (but not properly permitted) by a member of City staff in 2018-19.
- Authorities were alerted to the presence of the unpermitted modifications and insisted that they be removed.
- In 2020-21, the Harbormaster determined there was a Coast Guard-approved light that could be used.
- Complete application(s) were submitted to the Coast Guard in late 2021.
- Over the course of several years, follow-up was conducted with the PATON administrator in Alameda on the status of the applications. We were informed that the Coast Guard does not issue permits for such modifications, but had no objection to us making them – essentially, the absence of a “no” was the best we were going to get from them.
- An application to the Newport Harbor Foundation for funds to pay for the lights was submitted. The grant was approved in early 2024.
- With the Foundation’s grant, we ordered and installed half the lights in May and the other half in July of 2024.
- 24 lights covered most, but not all of the PATONs in the lower harbor and one Nav Buoy (14) just north of the Coast Highway Bridge. We chose to put them on all of the yellow racing markers, the anchorage boundary buoys, that red Nav buoy and a couple of the speed limit buoys that tend to get hit the most. There are still several other shoal buoys and swim area markers that didn’t get them.
- The lights do get damaged occasionally. One has ceased to function.

A survey of the lights was conducted. Repairs and replacements are being carried out.

The most amusing call of the month came from a boat owner, unaware his friend (not on the title of the vessel) was offering the boat for unpermitted, unlicensed charters and racked up \$6,000 in citations. The vessel’s registered owner was interested in a reduction in the citations, though he is the responsible owner and acknowledged receiving the Notice of Violations, citations, and fines.

Another contender for most amusing call of the month came from an event promoter invoking the names of a prominent waterfront resident and a former Mayor, inquiring about the opportunity to make use of one of the dredge barge laydown areas or another location to place a platform with a marketing display and cocktail service during the Christmas Boat Parade. The caller was advised of requirements related to the use of the public anchorages, including vessel operability and navigation lighting, length of stay limit (72 hours), and having someone aboard during hours of darkness. They were also advised of the need for a Harbor Events Permit for uses that do not comply with the regular anchorage requirements.

### **Conclusion**

During November and December 2025, the Harbor Department remained highly active in protecting water quality, ensuring navigational safety, and supporting public use during one of the busiest seasonal periods. Despite challenging weather conditions and increased operational demands, staff effectively addressed environmental risks, infrastructure issues, and enforcement priorities while continuing to advance long-term improvements to mooring systems, vessel maintenance practices, and training programs.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW:**

Staff recommends the Harbor Commission find this action is not subject to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Sections 15060(c)(2) (the activity will not result in a direct or reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment) and 15060(c)(3) (the activity is not a project as defined in Section 15378) of the CEQA Guidelines, California Code of Regulations, Title 14, Division 6, Chapter 3, because it has no potential for resulting in a physical change to the environment, directly or indirectly.

### **NOTICING:**

The agenda item has been noticed according to the Brown Act (72 hours in advance of the meeting at which the Harbor Commission considers the item).

### **ATTACHMENTS:**

Attachment A – Harbor Department Statistics Infographic