



# NEWPORT BEACH

## Harbor Commission Staff Report

March 11, 2026  
Agenda Item No. 6.4

**TO:** HARBOR COMMISSION

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**TITLE:** Discussion of Potential Safety Requirements for Small Vessel Rental Customers

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### **ABSTRACT:**

The Harbor Commission will conduct a discussion regarding potential safety requirements for single-day small vessel rental customers operating in Newport Harbor. The purpose of this discussion is to explore practical and enforceable measures that could improve safety for renters, other harbor users, and the general public. Topics include renter orientation and education, life jacket availability and use, operator age or competency considerations, standardized harbor rules and navigation awareness, and potential technology-based or operational best practices. The Commission's feedback will help inform whether staff or the Newport Harbor Safety Committee should further evaluate or develop recommended guidelines or requirements for future consideration.

### **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; or
3. Provide direction to staff and/or the Newport Harbor Safety Committee regarding potential safety guidelines or requirements for single-day small vessel rental concession operators and their customers in Newport Harbor.

### **FUNDING REQUIREMENTS:**

There is no immediate fiscal impact associated with this discussion item. Any future programmatic changes or requirements would be evaluated separately for fiscal impacts prior to implementation.

## **BACKGROUND:**

Single-day small vessel rentals—including electric boats, small motorized vessels, personal watercraft, kayaks, paddleboards, and similar watercraft—are a popular recreational activity in Newport Harbor. These rentals allow residents and visitors to enjoy the harbor without owning a vessel, but they also introduce safety and operational challenges due to the high proportion of inexperienced or first-time operators.

California law generally requires vessel operators to possess a California Boater Card, demonstrating completion of an approved boating safety course. However, California Harbors and Navigation Code Section 678.11(c)(5) provides an exemption for individuals operating a vessel rented for 30 days or less. As a result, most single-day rental customers in Newport Harbor are not required to hold a Boater Card and may have little or no prior boating education.

Rental operators typically provide a brief verbal orientation, written instructions, or both prior to departure. The depth and consistency of these orientations vary by operator and vessel type. Over recent years, the Harbor Department has responded to incidents, near-misses, and complaints involving rental vessels, including collisions, grounding incidents, navigation rule violations, congestion-related conflicts, and improper or inconsistent use of required safety equipment.

These trends have prompted interest in whether additional, standardized, or enhanced safety measures could reduce risk while preserving access to recreational boating opportunities.

## **DISCUSSION:**

The purpose of this agenda item is to initiate a policy-level discussion with the Harbor Commission regarding potential safety improvements specific to single-day small vessel rental customers. Because state law limits mandatory Boater Card requirements for short term renters, any local approach would likely focus on supplemental education, operational standards, and best practices rather than formal licensing.

The following discussion areas are provided to help frame Commission input:

1. Standardized Renter Safety Orientation
  - Requiring a minimum set of topics to be covered during renter orientations, regardless of operator or vessel type.
  - Core topics could include harbor speed limits, no-wake zones, right-of-way rules, ferry and commercial traffic awareness, anchoring and mooring restrictions, emergency procedures, and environmental protections.
  - Consideration of a short, standardized checklist or acknowledgement signed by the renter confirming completion of the orientation.

2. Use of Short Educational Media

- Development or adoption of a brief City-approved safety video (e.g., 5–10 minutes) tailored to Newport Harbor conditions.
- Videos could be viewed on-site, via QR code, or online prior to rental, reinforcing consistent messaging across operators.
- Content could be customized by vessel type (electric boats, personal watercraft, paddleboards).

3. Life Jacket Availability and Usage

- Ensuring consistent availability of properly sized U.S. Coast Guard–approved life jackets for all rental customers.
- Exploring policies that encourage or require life jacket use for children, non-swimmers, or operators of certain vessel types.
- Enhanced emphasis during orientations on when and why life jackets should be worn, even when not legally required.

4. Operator Age and Competency Considerations

- Discussion of minimum operator age standards by vessel type.
- Consideration of enhanced orientation or supervision requirements for younger or first-time operators.
- Exploration of voluntary competency self-assessments or knowledge checks prior to departure.

5. Harbor-Specific Rules and Wayfinding

- Improved distribution of harbor-specific rules through laminated onboard cards, maps, or decals.
- Use of simple visual aids showing traffic patterns, high-congestion areas, ferry routes, and restricted zones.
- Evaluation of existing harbor signage and opportunities to better support rental customers unfamiliar with the harbor layout.

6. Technology-Based Safety Tools

- Use of GPS-based geofencing on rental vessels to limit access to restricted or high-risk areas.
- Speed-limiting technology in sensitive zones.
- Real-time alerts or reminders for no-wake zones and traffic separation areas.

7. Incident Tracking and Operator Coordination

- Improved data collection on rental-related incidents and near-misses to identify trends.
- Periodic coordination meetings with rental operators to share safety concerns, incident data, and best practices.
- Encouraging a collaborative approach between the City and operators to continuously improve safety outcomes.

8. Public Education and Expectations

- Reinforcing to renters that Newport Harbor is an active working harbor with ferries, commercial operators, rowing programs, and emergency response vessels.
- Aligning messaging so renters understand they are entering a shared, regulated waterway—not a closed recreational lagoon.

The Harbor Commission's discussion can help determine which, if any, of these concepts warrant further evaluation by staff or the Newport Harbor Safety Committee for potential development into formal guidelines or future policy recommendations to the City Council.

**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 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 – Florida Boating Safety Education Requirements

Attachment B – Georgia Rental Boat Requirements

Attachment C – General Harbor Rules Signage

Attachment D – Harbor Map Sticker