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NEWPORT BEACH

Harbor Commission Staff Report

July 8, 2026
Agenda Item No. 7.1

TO: HARBOR COMMISSION

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TITLE: Progress Update — Small Vessel Rental Customer Safety Program: City-Produced Safety Video, Knowledge Quiz, and Certification Process

ABSTRACT:

Commissioner Scully will provide the Harbor Commission with an update on significant progress made toward improving safety for single-day small vessel rental customers operating in Newport Harbor. Since the Commission's initial policy discussion in September 2025 and the follow-up discussion in March 2026, the Newport Harbor Safety Committee has advanced the development of a City-produced safety video, an associated knowledge quiz, and a certification process. This report introduces that update and invites Commission discussion regarding the potential adoption of these tools as a strong suggestion or formal requirement for all small vessel rental customers on Newport Harbor.

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 the implementation of the City-produced safety video, knowledge quiz, and certification process as a strong suggestion or potential requirement for all 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. As previously noted at the March 11, 2026 Harbor Commission meeting, any future programmatic changes or requirements would be evaluated separately for fiscal impacts prior to implementation. Commissioner Scully previously indicated that the goal of the program

is to maintain simplicity and minimize cost, and that if funded by the City, there would be no direct production costs for rental operators.

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.

The Harbor Commission first took up this issue at its regular meeting on September 10, 2025, when Secretary Scully brought the item forward due to repeated safety concerns observed in the harbor, including reports of speeding, paddleboarders needing rescue, and other safety issues handled by Harbor Safety Officers. At that meeting, the Commission discussed the absence of any formal renter safety program beyond posted rules, reviewed examples from other jurisdictions, and directed staff and the Newport Harbor Safety Committee to further evaluate options.

The item returned to the Commission at its regular meeting on March 11, 2026, at which time a more detailed policy-level discussion was conducted. At the April 8, 2026 Harbor Commission meeting, Commissioner Scully — serving as Secretary and as the Commission's lead on the Newport Harbor Safety Committee — formally presented a proposal for a short, Newport Harbor-specific safety video of approximately five to ten minutes in length, covering navigation rules, mooring field awareness, ferry traffic, personal flotation device usage, currents, wind conditions, and emergency procedures. He proposed incorporating a brief assessment component, such as an eight- to ten-question quiz, with a time-stamped completion record that rental operators could verify prior to vessel use. He further proposed that the program be delivered through existing City tools, such as the Harbor Department website or QR code, with the goal of maintaining simplicity and minimizing cost.

Commissioner Scully described anticipated benefits, including improved safety awareness among rental users, enhanced liability protection for operators through documented training, establishment of a consistent harbor-wide safety standard, and no direct production costs for rental operators if funded by the City. He emphasized that the program would supplement, rather than replace, existing in-person safety briefings.

DISCUSSION:

Since the April 8, 2026, Harbor Commission meeting, significant progress has been made. The City has produced a Newport Harbor Safety Video, now available on YouTube, which covers the key safety topics identified by the Commission and the Newport Harbor Safety Committee. In parallel, a Newport Harbor Safety Quiz has been developed to accompany the video, consisting of ten questions organized across five topic sections: Life Jackets, Speed and Navigation, Safety Briefings, Environmental Responsibility, and General Safety.

The quiz is designed so that a passing score is required before a renter may operate a rental vessel, and upon completion, a certificate of completion is generated as a time-stamped record that rental operators can verify prior to departure. The quiz and resulting certificate are intended to be accessible via QR code or online prior to rental, consistent with the delivery model proposed by Commissioner Scully at the April 8, 2026, meeting.

Commissioner Scully will present the Commission with a full update on the current status of these tools, including the video, quiz, and certification process, and will seek Commission direction on the appropriate next steps for implementation.

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

1. Adoption as a Strong Suggestion or Potential Requirement

The Commission should consider whether the video, quiz, and certification process should be positioned as a strong suggestion to rental operators and their customers, or whether the Commission wishes to direct staff to evaluate the pathway toward making completion a formal requirement as a condition of rental. Commissioner Scully previously noted that 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.

2. Content and Coverage of the Safety Video and Quiz

The City-produced safety video and the associated ten-question quiz cover the following core topics:

Section	Topics Covered
Life Jackets	California law requirements for children under 13; importance for all operators
Speed & Navigation	5 mph no-wake speed limit; channel navigation; main channel access to Pacific Ocean
Safety Briefings	Comprehensive pre-departure briefing requirements; vessel operation and emergency procedures

Section	Topics Covered
Harbor Awareness	Newport Harbor's more than 880 acres of tidal lands, a mix of vessel types
Environmental Responsibility	Proper trash disposal, keeping the harbor clean
General Safety	Situational awareness; responsible seamanship; emergency signaling procedures

3. Operator Coordination and Implementation

Commissioner Scully previously indicated that input and cooperation from rental operators would be critical to ensure program effectiveness and acceptance, and that further coordination with the Harbormaster would be necessary to assess feasibility and determine whether the City would support and fund the program. The Commission may wish to discuss the appropriate mechanism for engaging rental operators — including those holding Marine Activity Permits — in the rollout of the video, quiz, and certification process.

4. Relationship to Existing Safety Briefings

The video, quiz, and certification process are intended to supplement, not replace, the in-person safety briefings currently provided by rental operators. The quiz reinforces that rental concession operators are expected to provide a comprehensive safety briefing covering vessel operation, local regulations, and emergency procedures prior to departure.

5. Harbor Department Contact Information

The quiz and certification materials note that the Harbor Department is available at (949) 270-8159 and via VHF Channel 17 for assistance.

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 – Newport Harbor Safety Video and Quiz Link and Quiz Questions

Attachment B – Newport Harbor Safety Certificate of Completion