

Chapter II

What Makes Laguna Beach Special: Assets and Opportunities

Throughout the visioning project, community members were asked to identify those things which they believe to be Laguna Beach's greatest assets. This is a crucial first step in the visioning process. While the resulting list is not surprising, it is important to the process that we collectively acknowledge a comprehensive list of our strengths. The reason for this is to assure that the vision we create is one that is built from a solid consensus on what we already like most about our community. This will help us better understand where we want to go and why.

As summarized below, the assets of today's Laguna Beach do not exist as isolated or unchanging elements. Rather, they have interacted and evolved over time. It is their dynamic interaction that has created the Laguna Beach we know today. As nothing stands still, these assets and opportunities will continue to change and interact among themselves as well as with other new forces that develop from within and from without. As discussed in later chapters, a major challenge to building an effective and enduring vision will be to anticipate this change and make the appropriate provisions both in the vision and in the strategic plan for getting there.

Unique and Beautiful Natural Environment

Surrounded by the Pacific Ocean on one side and steep canyons and hillsides on the other, Laguna Beach evolved along its own distinctive path, in rela-



tive isolation from the surrounding county. A spectacular physical setting with expansive beaches, secluded coves, pristine ocean waters, steep cliffs, rolling hills, deep canyons, whitewater vistas, and gorgeous sunsets has always attracted people to Laguna Beach. The surrounding steep terrain forms a dramatic visual backdrop and creates a moderate marine climate. Recognizing the need to preserve these natural elements, Laguna Beach has developed an extensive network of open space and parks in and around the city, including the greenbelt of dedicated parkland.

Small Town and Village Charm

The human scale of development—the quaint homes and beach cottages of Laguna Beach—distinguish it from other coastal communities. Residents and visitors walk to unique shops, galleries, and restaurants and experience a sense of community. It is friendly, a

good place to raise a family, and a small town that feels warm and safe. A strong sense of location and history fosters both identity and atmosphere.

Diverse, Active, and Tolerant Citizenry

The varied, well-educated population participates in over 20 neighborhood associations and 100 community organizations. These organizations address everything from environmental issues and the arts to homelessness and HIV/AIDS. The community has a strong sense of involvement, great civic pride, is extremely tolerant of differing life styles, and places a high value on volunteerism and service. Energetic citizens believe individuals can and do make a difference in the civic and philanthropic life of the community. A willingness to try new ideas and programs also contributes to the unique character of life in Laguna Beach.



Accessible, Responsive Local Government

The City is based on a Council-Manager form of government that enables the ideas and opinions of its citizens to be heard and to effect real change.

Citizens serve on 12 standing committees and commissions, which advise the City Council on everything from the arts to open space. This partnership between the City and an activist citizenry is the foundation for the forward-thinking planning that has, for example, enabled Laguna Beach to create and protect its “greenbelt,” prevent the widening of Laguna Canyon Road and the Pacific Coast Highway, significantly reduce residential densities below what was established in its initial General Plan, adopt height limitations and other development restrictions, and acquire and construct Main Beach Park.

Distinctive Residential Neighborhoods

Laguna Beach is made up of distinct neighborhoods, defined in part by the natural landscape, the built environment, and the friendly, diverse people who live in them. Laguna Beach retains a distinctive scale and an eclectic mix of housing. Each neighborhood has its own landmarks, geography, and local history. These are reflected in names like Top of the World, Bluebird Canyon, Woods Cove, Canyon Acres, and Three Arch Bay. Hillside living and the views that go with it are also important. Street layout creates surprise and adds to the variety and texture of the neighborhoods. Retaining neighborhood identity is a major value for the community.

Enjoyable, Intimate, and Vibrant Downtown

Steep topography and the Pacific shoreline converge to shape and enhance the Downtown village. This pedestrian-oriented shopping area provides a place for both residents and visitors to mingle in an area that is lively day and night. A variety of restaurants, galleries, and boutiques co-exist with resident-serving local shops and businesses. The varied age, architec-

tural style, and size of downtown buildings add texture and variety to the area. Neighbors meet, share conversations, and nourish a spirit of community.

Tradition of Arts and Culture

Inspired by the great beauty of its natural setting, an artists colony was established here in 1917, ensuring that arts and culture would always be at the heart of what makes Laguna Beach special. During the Depression, the Pageant of Masters along with the Festival of the Arts evolved to support the resident artists, establishing a summer tradition that attracts millions of visitors each year. Today, there are over 80 galleries and 400 registered artists and many other artists and crafts people either living, working, or exhibiting in Laguna Beach. The community is further enlivened by several other art festivals, as well as major cultural institutions like the Art Institute of Southern California, the Laguna Art Museum, and the Laguna Playhouse. “Music In The Park” and “First Thursdays Art Walk” are other examples of Laguna’s emphasis on culture and community. This historic and continuing confluence of art, craft, and community inspiration cements the cultural identity of Laguna in the minds of both residents and visitors alike.

High Quality Schools

Lagunans have always been willing to invest in the quality of local schools, and students regularly do well on standardized tests. More than 90% of Laguna Beach graduates go on to attend college. The community is well educated and values life-long learning.

