

Bob Burnside, About Dick Fitzgerald

Richard "Fitz" Fitzgerald, First Director of the Los Angeles County Department of Beaches.

When the 4th District supervisor, Burton Chace, presented to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors the motion to remove the county Lifeguards from the administration of the Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation Department and establish a new Department of Beaches, his motion passed unanimously.

Chief Bud Stevenson had for many years envisioned this concept and had often presented to Supervisor Chace the advantages of a separate Department of Beaches, responsible for the overall management and development of the county's coastal operations. Chief Stevenson had recognized that separating and consolidating the other Lifeguard operations within Los Angeles County into one Department of Beaches would best serve the people of Los Angeles, and allow for development to meet the future needs for the safety and recreation for the people of California.

Once Supervisor Chace's motion was passed, Chief Stevenson was hesitant to accept the newly formed position as director of the new department for reasons that remained his own. He recommended to Supervisor Chace that the Redondo Beach Chamber of Commerce manager, Richard Fitzgerald, be seriously considered for appointment as Director of the Department of Beaches. Fitzgerald was a long time supporter of Stevenson's vision.

Chief Stevenson had seen his early dreams of acquiring safety series retirement and salary parity with the other safety service departments come to fruition. The establishment of a Department of Beaches to be administered by Lifeguards, the final step in his years of endless work, had come to pass. He was now ready to retire and leave the tools to move our new department forward to those who shared his vision for the Lifeguards.

Richard Fitzgerald, "Fitz," as he preferred to be called, immediately embarked on an aggressive program to implement the many objectives that had so often been discussed between him and Chief Bud Stevenson. He not only started campaigning to incorporate the Santa Monica Lifeguards, LA City Lifeguards, and Long Beach Lifeguards into the new Department of Beaches, but embarked on a program to acquire additional property within the coastal zone of Los Angeles County before it became financially impossible to do so.

Fitz had his own vision of what the people of Los Angeles needed. He promoted a coastline bicycle path affording recreation opportunities for the many bicycle enthusiasts. The need for new construction of adequate rest rooms to serve the public

became a high priority. He worked to establish year around rescue boat operations on Catalina Island to better serve the boating needs of the ever-increasing cross channel activity. All of these things with the exception of bringing the Long Beach Lifeguards into the Department of Beaches became reality under his administration.

As the Department of Beaches began to exercise its new-found muscle Fitz became aware that within the Malibu area, many of the "old tract" maps indicated that the County had acquired 10 foot wide public easements as a condition for building permits on the beach. This would insure that access to the beach would always be preserved for the public along the Malibu coast.

Many of these easements had been blocked by property owners, and in some instances gardens, swimming pools and fences had been installed blocking deeded public access. It would appear that the county was way ahead of the California Coastal Commission in its effort to secure public access. Ironically, the county was to take heat from the state over public access issues in years to come under the administration of the Department of Beaches and Harbors.

A lengthy and nasty political battle ensued between the Department of Beaches and the many wealthy property owners who were not going to give back what they had, for so many years, felt was abandoned property. Many local property owners became disgruntled about the bicycle paths, restrooms and an aggressive department using eminent domain procedures to acquire more public beach. This inevitably became an Achilles heel for the Department of Beaches.

After years of fighting for the rights of the public, politically powerful forces joined to devise a plan to curtail the Department of Beaches. Several difficult years followed for Fitz, who with declining health eventually suffered a serious heart attack. At a critical time for the department, Dick Fitzgerald was forced to retire.

Under the guise of consolidation the Beaches Department was placed under the administration of the Department of Small Craft Harbors, a department more sympathetic to private property owners. Sadly, that ended the vision of our early pioneers for the county Lifeguards.

Fortunately the story does not end here. After years of struggling under a hostile administration and faced with extinction by a thousand cuts, the Lifeguard service was transferred to the Los Angeles Fire Department. The Fire Department is one of the county's premier organizations totally focused on providing the best quality public safety service. Under this new management the Lifeguard service has flourished.

It needs to be said that the transfer of Lifeguard services to the Fire Department was nurtured and shepherded by one man. We owe an unending debt of gratitude to Don Knabe, formerly the Fourth Supervisor District's Chief Deputy, later to become Supervisor.