

By [Christopher Trela](#) on January 11th, 2013

Longtime Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Richard Luehrs To Retire

Newport Beach Chamber of Commerce President and CEO, Richard Luehrs, has announced that he plans to retire Tuesday from the position that he has held for more than 30 years.

The announcement came in the form of an email to Chamber of Commerce members from Tim Brown, Chairman of the Newport Beach Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, and via a press release jointly issued by Luehrs and Brown.

"Richard's tenure at the NBCC is a remarkable story in an era where the average of a chamber commerce President/CEO is five years," said Brown in his email.

According to Brown, the NBCC has evolved from simply acting as an organization that represents small business interests. Now, The chamber – which has nearly 700 members – plays an important role in marketing Newport Beach. The chamber also formed a political action group that Brown says took reasonable and respected positions on local initiatives as well as supported candidates running for city council who would keep the business interests of the community in the forefront of policy making.

"While the political action group has been removed from direct affiliation with the chamber, it remains a separate, viable entity that may take on increasing business advocacy roles in the future," wrote Brown. "In today's difficult business climate, it has become apparent that the NBCC can no longer serve all of [it's] constituencies. As a result, Richard has decided to retire from his current role as President/CEO so that he can focus fulltime on business advocacy, thus allowing the NBCC to narrow its mission to better serve our member businesses in these challenging economic times."

Brown noted that NBCC is "beginning a new path that will enable us to reexamine our role in serving the unique Newport Beach business community in a world that has been dramatically altered by technology and the current state of the economy."

Reached at his office, Luehrs – who admitted he had been considering retirement for several months – said there have been ongoing conversations about the role of the Chamber of Commerce and what its focus should be heading into 2013, and beyond.

"Let's assume that the chamber goes in a new direction. Am I the right guy to lead that? Probably not," said Luehrs.

"Should the chamber be spending time on planning and executing of variety of special events?" wondered Luehrs. "Maybe it would be better that someone other than the chamber handles it. That is on the table. There are also questions about should the chamber focus on advocacy. Those decisions have not been finalized. In the meantime, there is a need for advocacy, and I've been doing that, but nothing solid is worked out on that either."

According to Luehrs, the chamber's leadership has begun conversations with Visit Newport Beach to address a more effective business model where the chamber transfers some of its signature events to that organization to allow the Chamber to refocus its efforts in support of small business.

Under Luehrs' leadership, the chamber founded the popular Taste of Newport Event, strengthened and brought national attention to the Christmas Boat Parade, founded the community's Leadership Program, assisted in the development and passage of the city's general plan, and hosted countless networking events in support of local business.

Luehrs and the chamber have also weathered financial challenges. This past November the Newport Beach Independent reported on the chamber's finances, which showed that Taste of Newport had been losing money every year for several years, and that the chamber required financial assistance from the city of Newport Beach.

Changes at the chamber come at the same time that Visit Newport Beach is rebranding itself as Newport Beach and Co. to better market the city to a variety of publics.

"What we're doing is not because of anything the chamber is doing or not doing," explained Gary Sherwin, President and CEO of Visit Newport Beach and the new parent organization, Newport Beach and Co. "We've been in discussions with city leaders for the past two years about how Visit Newport Beach could be of greater value to the community."

Under the new marketing concept, Newport Beach and Co. is the new organization that will have a variety of sub-categories including Visit Newport Beach, Film Newport Beach, Dining Newport Beach, Enterprise Newport Beach, and others.

"Our organization was a division of the Chamber of Commerce back in the 1970s, and as we became more sophisticated we became our own organization," said Sherwin.

"The chamber has had some financial issues that may result in moving signature chamber events over here, and those discussions continue," Sherwin added. "The chamber does political advocacy, and we don't want any part of that. Our thing is marketing. This community is not looking for a new Costco or Walmart, it's about selling the wonderful assets that already exist."

Sherwin noted that as the chamber reorganizes, his organization will continue to have talks with the chamber.

"They need a new direction. All chambers across the country are going through many of the same things. It used to be that a business joined a chamber of commerce, but now they set up a website, so what is the value proposition? What can they do that nobody else can do that provides real value to members?"

Brown says that the Newport Beach Chamber of Commerce intends to hire an Interim CEO who will be able to bring consensus among the Chamber Board of Directors and its support groups such as the Commodores and Ambassadors on a sustainable business model.