

DAILY PILOT

Newport Chamber president to retire

By Jill Cowan

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After three decades at the helm, Newport Beach Chamber of Commerce President and Chief Executive Richard Luehrs announced his retirement Tuesday.

His last day will be Jan. 15, according to Board Chairman Tim Brown.

"It has been my distinct privilege to work with these and past community leaders for more than 30 years," Luehrs said in a statement. "It is now time to prepare for the next century of support and influence to our business community."

Luehrs, 65, of Newport Beach, will refocus on business advocacy and the chamber will "narrow its mission to better serve our member businesses in these challenging economic times," Brown wrote in a separate statement.

While Luehrs's tenure was marked by his development of local events such as the Taste of Newport and Christmas Boat Parade, he also dealt with his share of local politics.

In December he opposed a Boat Parade boycott residents called for in protest of dock fee hikes saying it would harm local businesses that rely on visitors drawn to the parade.

Early last year, local activist and former Assembly candidate Bob Rush called for an audit of the chamber, alleging membership funds and political action committee monies were intermingled.

The chamber separated its finances and said it stopped collecting political donations at the start of 2012. Luehrs formerly served on the board of trustees of the PAC, but resigned in January 2012.

"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," Brown wrote.

There have also been calls by some in the business community to better align – or even merge – the chamber with Visit Newport, the city tourism bureau.

Luehrs may have been of the longest-serving chamber of commerce members in Orange County, as a typical chamber president's tenure is closer to five years.

An interim CEO will be selected, a news release said, to take on the responsibility of "bringing consensus among the chamber Board of Directors and its support groups such as the commodores and ambassadors on a sustainable business model ensuring the organization not only addresses the needs of local business, but also continues to add strong community value..."

— *Daily Pilot reporter Lauren Williams contributed to this report.*

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