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Profile: Orange County's Fastest Growing City

BY CATHI FIROR

Huntington Beach began as a coastal community with a population of 915 when it was incorporated in 1909. Its major income was oil and its few businesses settled on Main Street.

In the 1960s, however, Huntington Beach grew from a sleepy little surf town into a major bedroom community. It drew residents by the thousands—growing 375 per cent during the first six years of the 1970s—but all of its inhabitants seemed to work in other towns.

This influx of residents has made Huntington Beach the fastest growing city in the continental United States for a decade. It now boasts 167,000 residents. Predictably, the city has experienced certain problems because of this growth and is now having to ask itself some hard questions about the nature and rate of this development. And the answers Huntington Beach finds will, to a large extent, determine what the future will hold—though change continues at a rapid pace.

For growth has meant yet another major personality change for Huntington Beach. The surf town and the bedroom community have given way to commercial/industrial development and its new found business status has both pleased and perplexed city officials and residents.

They are pleased because their city is Orange County's third largest and because its industrial growth is stabilizing. But they are perplexed because the growth has had no direction. And available industrial land is running short.

"Industrial land went nowhere until 1975," says Chuck Clark of the Economic Development Department. In 1976-77, the city developed 100 acres of industrial land. It was a sizable amount, especially for a city whose industrial growth was just beginning to blossom. The now stabilized development rate runs at about 20 to 25 acres per year.

Though the city's first Economic Development Department heralded the 1960s population boom with plans to expand the city's industry, there is no current "master plan" to regulate industry, construction or rehabilitation of older areas.

"We were trying to generate jobs,

local ones, to eliminate commuters," says Bill Back of Great Western Industrial Realtors.

Back worked in the Economic Development Department during Huntington Beach's most prolific growth period.

"At that time, our office was a one-man shop, and we were selling an intangible thing—there were so many variables and so much involved. The philosophy was to bring business to Huntington Beach, and sell the city. We tried to look at the whole picture of the community."

It worked.

Huntington Beach sold itself, generated industry and jobs, and became more than the county's bedroom. Prime residential land became saturated in the early 1970s, and industrial land began its transformation under city guidelines in 1975.

As the southern part of Orange County beckoned to industry, so did Huntington Beach. Because it is close to the ties of Los Angeles County, and because of its open land, Huntington Beach has become more and more attractive to business.

McDonnell Douglas established an aerospace plant in Huntington Beach in 1959, when the city's population was on the upswing. Until then, the city's revenues had come from the oil industry. Now McDonnell Douglas is one of the

oldest and largest companies in the city.

Walt Cleveland, director of McDonnell Douglas' public relations and a former chamber of commerce member, watched the city grow up. He calls the growth smooth and organized, and says he expects more of the same.

"We've been in a position to observe all this growth, but it hasn't meant much to us," he says. Housing availability has never been a problem to the plant, because the county's housing decline began when there was a cutback in the plant's personnel. Company employees peaked in 1968, but after the Apollo project ended, Douglas employed only half of its former 10,000 workers.

Traffic hasn't been a problem either, according to Cleveland. "Certainly when the growth is as fast and as much as it has been in the past six or seven years, the traffic will affect our people going in and out of the plant," he says. "But the city and the county have handled it very well."

Bill Spencer, personnel director of Weiser Cabinet Hardware, supervised that company's move from South Gate to Huntington Beach during the past year. He says the company, a division of Norris Industries, decided on the Huntington Beach site because of labor market availability, the cost of land, the location of the industrial park and the company's knowledge that many of

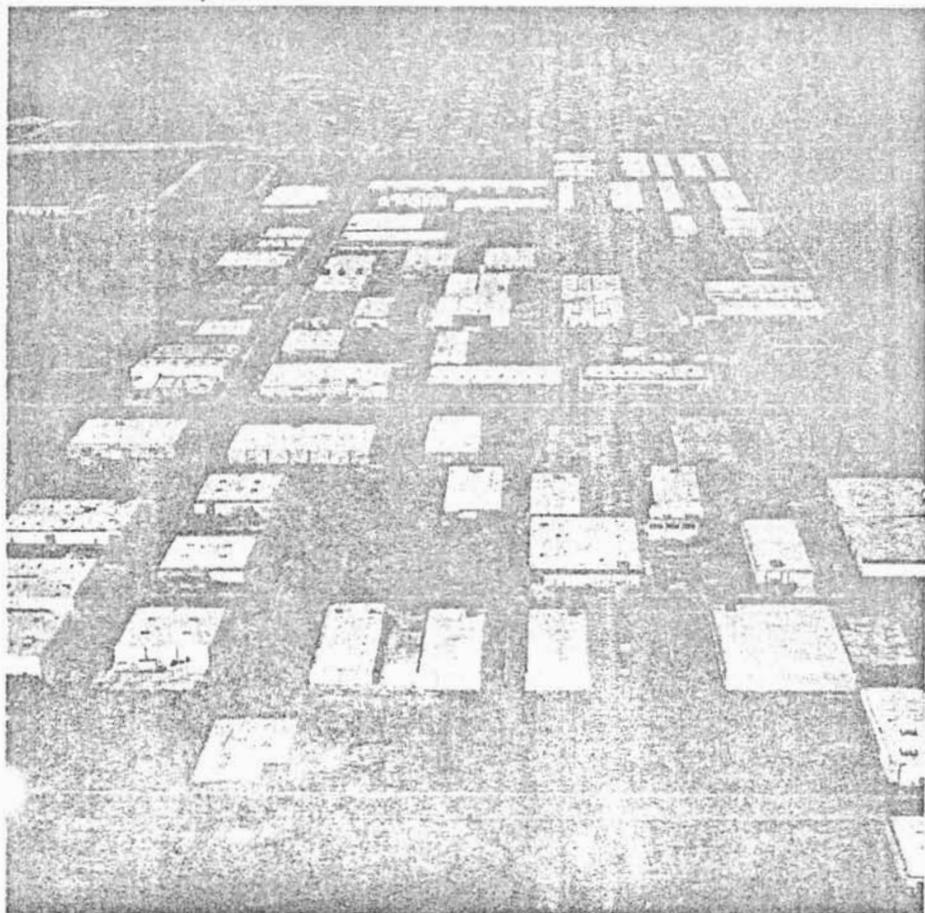
ECONOMIC INDICATORS* CITY OF HUNTINGTON BEACH

	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977
Population	137,189	143,636	146,411	152,148	157,800
Median Family Income	17,760	20,474	22,573	24,655	26,911
Total Taxable Sales (\$Mil.)	294.2	319.2	359.3	438.2	548.7
Retail Taxable Sales (\$Mil.)	264.4	284.1	317.3	389.2	483.2
Building Activity					
—Total Valuation (\$Mil.)	79.6	51.2	97.5	145.1	155.9
—Commercial-Industrial	12.4	11.3	13.7	16.9	42.3
Employment (Orange County)					
—Labor Force (Thous.)	586.5	720.1	799.0	827.7	875.0
—Unemployment	27.1	45.0	77.2	61.9	42.6
—Unemployment Rate (%)	4.6	6.2	9.7	7.5	4.9

SOURCE: *Latest figures available from the Huntington Beach Economic Development Department.



HUNTINGTON BEACH today (below) and as it looked in 1957—a city once dominated by surfing and oil derricks is now filling rapidly with sophisticated industrial development.



its employes already lived in Orange County.

Weiser is already one of the city's top employers.

Part of an ever continuing stream of business and industry into the city, Weiser was received well by officials and the public. Workers from Los Angeles and from North Orange County are picked up by company buses at several places, and Spencer says, "Compared to South Gate, the traffic is great."

At the same time industry was expanding, new malls were being constructed and building permits were jumping from zero to 100,000 in a single year, the downtown section of Huntington Beach was deteriorating. Surf shops and thrift shops took over—though some of

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the older businesses stayed.

One of them was a gasoline station owned by Ted Bartlett, a city council member off and on for the past 20 years and a long-time member of the chamber of commerce. Retired in January, 1979, Bartlett remembers the city's growth during the 30 years he watched its personality change.

"All over the United States the inner cities were struggling to rehabilitate," he says. "People were moving to the suburbs. It was no different here. We tried to get Housing and Urban Development grants (for rehabilitation) but when you're dealing with individual landowners, you fall flat.

"The people downtown are surviving—they're happy that way."

Bartlett has seen master plan after master plan in the city government—but none of them have lasted, or worked.

"They're all working towards different plans," he says. "The builders would like to see a master plan, but they keep on building what they want to build."

The need for such a plan is clear to people such as Bartlett, who have seen the city grow from a hodgepodge surf town to the sprawling community it is today. The continuing high rate of population growth, the national issues of inflation and gasoline shortages, and industrial and commercial concerns underline the seriousness of the city's indecision.

"There is a great deal of commercial and industrial growth going on," Bartlett says. "They (businesses) come here for

the people and for the growth. Our area is almost smog free because of the Catalina Channel, and they come for that, too.

"But business expands too much everywhere. The dollar is up now, so you see three or four new shopping areas come up, of fairly good size, and it just spreads."

Bill Reed, public information officer for the city, has also seen Huntington Beach grow up; his view of city management is more positive.

"Two things amaze me about this city's growth. The first is that it has been so orderly. Industrial and housing tracts have sprung up, and there is no big game of 'catch up' to be played. There is no backlog of streets to be built and relatively no sewer problems. And during all this time the city staff has been small. They began with practically a skeleton crew of 400 in 1960. By 1968 they had 800 employees.

"The second thing is that the growth has been diverse. There are large industrial parks in the central corridor and in the northern sections, and oil is still a big industry. The oil companies have held land along the coast in a reserve. The growth has slowed down now, though population growth has been steady over the years."

The city government is determined to maintain consistent industrial and commercial growth as well—to use the city's space wisely and to gain the maximum share of federal and state revenues.

But there are two problems.

The first is the lack of a long range plan.

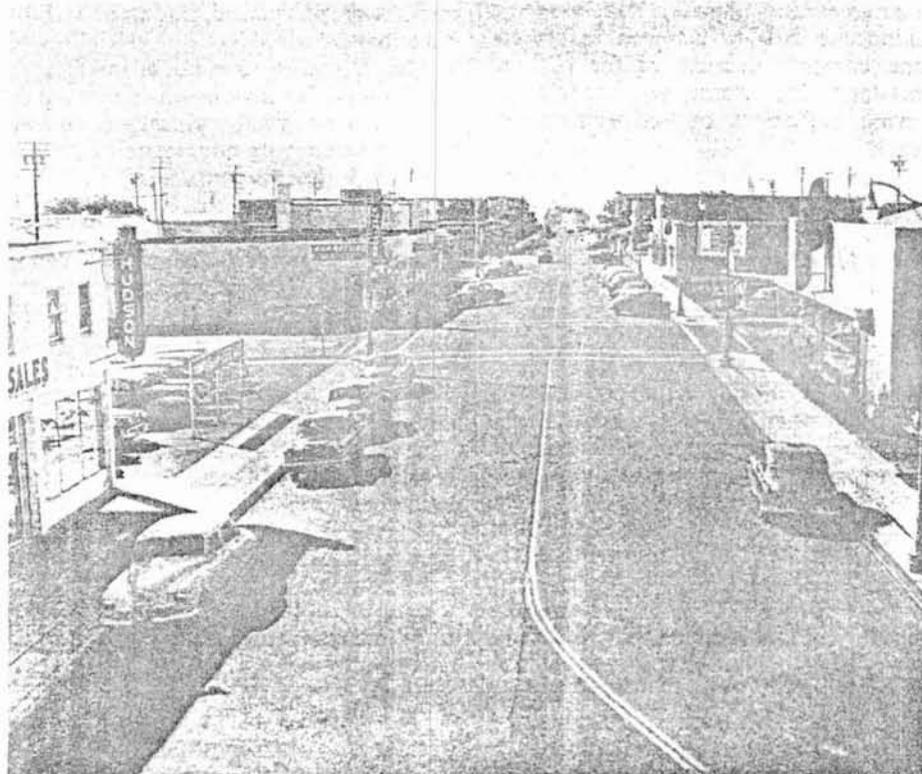
The second is budget cuts resulting from Proposition 13. Subsidies from Huntington Beach's extensive property taxes were pared down and the city staff was cut back. The city council is currently giving high priority to the proposition's fiscal impact.

Meanwhile, the preoccupied city government is not addressing the problem of industrial growth planning. Eighty-five per cent of Huntington Beach's land is developed. "Now we face the problem of continuing to develop the area," says Clark. "But we have nowhere to go."

The city has decided to allow industry to develop in the older sections of town—the central industrial corridor on Gothard Street between McFadden Avenue and the San Diego Freeway to Main Street, the heart of the original Huntington Beach. Lusk Industrial Park in Bolsa Chica is another concentration area, though the park there is almost fully developed.

"Because of Proposition 13," city staff member Clark says, "planning has become a luxury item for municipalities. Planning is occurring now more and more in the administration—they farm it out rather than having the staff do it ourselves. And how could we do it with no staff?"

Local government has been reluctant to give up local control over development. And funding from federal and state programs is not available to cities



DOWNTOWN Huntington Beach has declined since it was the hub of city activity in the 1950s (above). However, city council-mandated redevelopment will update the area.

without long range planning studies. So Huntington Beach, like other cities, is in a Catch-22 situation.

"All of the commercial areas are built out, except along some parts of Beach Boulevard," Clark says. "There is an ongoing process of downtown redevelopment. The city has lowered its sights from building up a resort center to implementing a rehabilitation program using key vacant sites."

In fact, the city council recently approved a program to force owners of

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downtown buildings to bring them up to various building code standards. But private capital will have to be the major source of money used to complete downtown renewal, the council said.

"The city has looked at any growth—commercially and industrially—as being good," Bill Holman, also of the Economic Development Department, says. "But the city doesn't have a growth control program. The local economy determines the climate. People aren't taking the risk on an idea before its time comes." Because of the lack of "master plan," some say the city is driving customers out of Huntington Beach.

Homeowners are against the continuing development of industry in the city because of the shortage of available land. They say the Gothard Street industrial area should be redeveloped into a residential zone.

But the growth oriented city council—a new type of council for Huntington Beach—is against further residential zoning. In the 1977 election, the council shifted its stand from environmental concerns to industrial ones. Though the businessmen have an edge now, the council is torn by controversy and strife, with one member recently resigning after a stormy hearing.

Harriett Weider, now representing Huntington Beach on the Orange County Board of Supervisors, is a resident and former mayor of the city. She says its growth—in population and industry—has not been properly managed or carefully planned by the city government.

"Besides being a bedroom community of commuters, the city hasn't recognized the need—and its leaders

have not pushed—to keep tax dollars within the city," she says. "My own cliché is that Huntington Beach residents shop in Westminster, dine in Newport Beach and go to the show in Costa Mesa.

"They are not recognizing that we are a beach city," she says of the city government. "We have moved away from the core and we need to get back to the center. We are a microcosm of a larger city that needs to develop its downtown area."

Although 10 per cent of the state's beaches are located in Huntington Beach, Weider pointed out that the city has not yet taken advantage of the tourism, view and recreational uses it has to offer.

But growth has affected all Orange County cities, some of them more than others, according to Robert Badham, who represents Huntington Beach in Congress.

Crowded schools, lack of planning and lack of zoning are common symptoms of the sudden temporary expansion from which Orange County cities are recovering.

Though there are state and federal funding interests in areas of rapid growth—school funds, for example—there has been no "great philosophical or demographic changes because of the growth. It is rather homogenous," Badham says.

But Huntington Beach is an enigma—a land saturated with industry and people that longs for more industry and people; a land recovering after an exhaustive growth period, glad to be stabilizing that growth.

Huntington Beach is not an integrated community. Its downtown is separated logistically and philosophically from the rest of the city; its city council from its city staff; its residents torn between environmental concerns, housing needs and industrial growth.

The lack of a unified city government and the lack of a master plan for the city's future are detrimental to future growth. But the availability of beachfront land—all of it under oil company reserves—has safeguarded the city's future in a number of ways.

It can provide needed housing, and if developed properly, could become prime beachfront property.

It could provide needed industrial land, adjacent to major thoroughfares and freeways.

And it will continue to provide oil to an industry currently under pressure from both government and citizens to produce.

The promise of "kept land" is as open and potentially prolific as the land is expensive and expansive. And it may be the only promise Huntington Beach—with its changing business perspectives and personality—will be able to keep. ■