Los Angeles Times

Former L.A. Councilman Tom LaBonge, known by many as 'Mr. Los Angeles,' dies at 67

Los Angeles City Councilman Tom LaBonge hugs his wife, Brigid, during a ceremony in 2015 to mark his 39 years as a public servant. (Genaro Molina/Los Angeles Times)

By **DAVID ZAHNISER**, & **DAKOTA SMITH**

Thursday January 7, 2021 11:05 PM

Former Los Angeles City Councilman Tom LaBonge adored Los Angeles. The 39-year veteran of City Hall regularly asked Angelenos to name their favorite L.A. buildings. He gave away calendars of his own photographs of the city and handed out loaves of pumpkin bread baked by local nuns.

He loved hikes in Griffith Park and on at least one occasion, went to San Pedro for the Polar Bear Swim, charging into the chilly water on New Year's Day.

When voters considered breaking the city up into two or three pieces, LaBonge made clear he was passionately opposed. If secession passed, "the sun would rise and all the other things would happen," LaBonge told The Times in 2002. "But it would personally hurt me."

LaBonge, who served on the City Council from 2001 to 2015, died tonight of an apparent heart attack. His wife, Brigid, said she had been unable to wake him up after he had been resting on the couch. Paramedics were called to their Silver Lake home. He was 67. "He was a good person," said Brigid, his wife of 41 years.

LaBonge was known for his love of the city's many landmarks and public spaces, and for his bottomless wealth of city trivia. For much of his time in office, he could be seen driving around the city in his Ford Crown Victoria, getting out to regale constituents and tourists alike.

"He was such an irrepressible cheerleader for Los Angeles — a walking encyclopedia of all the amazing things and spots and neighborhoods and institutions in L.A.," said Councilman Mike Bonin, who represents the city's coastal neighborhoods. "He was the Huell Howser of L.A. politics, a spirit that was always optimistic and in love with the city."

LaBonge graduated from John Marshall High School in Los Feliz and later fought to save it from the wrecking ball. He got his political start with Mayor Tom Bradley's youth council in 1974, then secured a job with Councilwoman Peggy Stevenson two years later.

It should be noted that Councilwoman Peggy Stevenson of the 13th District in 1976 took over that district from her husband, actor Robert Stevenson, following his death in 1975. Coincidentally, Robert Stevenson played the vicious escaped convict Ralph Neal in the pilot episode of *Highway Patrol* starring Broderick Crawford in 1955.

In 1978, LaBonge secured a job working for Councilman John Ferraro, whose district he went on to represent decades later. He ran for council in 1993, losing to former school board member Jackie Goldberg, and became as an aide to Mayor Richard Riordan. He also did a short stint with the Department of Water and Power.

Throughout his career, LaBonge acknowledged he was focused less on the finer points of public policy and more on nuts-and-bolts constituent services. He took a special interest in trash pickup, working to remove the many pieces of furniture that were regularly deposited on the sidewalks of Silver Lake, Los Feliz, Hollywood, Hancock Park, Miracle Mile, and other parts of his district.

By the time LaBonge left office, the city had a trash truck named after him. In 2015, the year he was forced out by term limits, LaBonge sponsored a farewell photo exhibition at City Hall to commemorate his departure. One of the photos captured him at the Farmers Market, clutching an ice cream cone and flashing a big smile.

"You know, sometimes I get criticized, and they say I'm not a visionary," LaBonge said in a 2015 interview with KPCC-FM's John Rabe. "I'm an absolute visionary, and the vision comes from people, and how people feel about their city."

Fond remembrances of LaBonge showed up quickly on social media. Gary Goltz, Tom's beloved Ambassador Without Portfolio, wrote "Ten-4 my good friend!" "I loved watching him sneak away at events to snap selfies of himself," wrote Alissa Walker, who writes for Curbed and New York magazine, adding: "Hike Griffith Park this weekend in his honor."

Council President Nury Martinez, posting on Instagram, also highlighted LaBonge's support for Griffith Park, as well as his ability to connect with his constituents. "He knew every mascot of every high school in Los Angeles for a reason — so he could engage people and talk to them about their lives," she wrote.

Los Angeles County Supervisor Janice Hahn, who served on the council for roughly a decade, said on Twitter that she did not know if anyone would love the city as much as LaBonge. "He was and will always be Mr. Los Angeles," she wrote.

Photo: Councilmember LaBonge holds a picture of himself and the inventor of the Sigalert, Loyd C. Sigmon at a news conference honoring the anniversary of the first broadcast Sigalert in Los Angeles on January 22, 2012. In the photo: from left, CHP Southern Division Assistant Chief Calvin Aubrey, Gary Goltz (in Fedora), Doug Failing, MTA Executive in Charge of Highway Services, Tom LaBonge and Caltrans District 7 Director Michael Miles.

Post Script – David Allen comments on Tom are at the end of this article on January 12, 2021; under miscelLAny. On January 26, 2021; the Mount Hollywood Summit which overlooks the Griffith Park Observatory was renamed the Tom LaBonge Panorama (photo below). On January 29, 2021; the Wilshire/La Brea Station stop on the new Purple Line to be opened in 2023 was renamed in honor of Tom (photo above). On February 9, 2021; it was announced plans to use Tom's voice on the City's 311 Information Line. L.A. Board of Water and Power Commissioners renamed two landmark water facilities to honor the late City Councilmember, Tom LaBonge. Tom was laid to rest at Forest Lawn in Los Angeles on February 9, 2021 (photos below & watch video).