



Council President Pro Tem Kevin Faulconer  
Councilmember Todd Gloria  
Councilmember Sherri Lightner

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## **MAKING SAN DIEGO'S BEACHES MORE ACCESSIBLE**

*Donations provide three new wheelchairs for beachgoers with disabilities*

SAN DIEGO – Councilmembers, community groups and advocates for those with disabilities will come together today to unveil the addition of three new beach wheelchairs just in time for the busy summer months.

The new additions will help keep up with demand for San Diego's free beach wheelchair program – something that is popular with locals and tourists alike. The chairs, which have oversized wheels to make it easier to travel over sand, are available to members of the public at lifeguard towers in La Jolla Shores, Mission Beach, Ocean Beach and Pacific Beach.

Amelia Opean, a paraplegic since a devastating car accident when she was 15 years old, started the push for the new wheelchairs. An avid ocean swimmer, Opean was having a hard time reaching the water because the beach wheelchair at La Jolla Shores was out of commission.

“Without the chair, my swim group had to recruit help on the beach to get me to the water or to ask the lifeguards, who, on occasion, drove me down to the shoreline,” Opean said.

Never one to be deterred, Opean started a fundraising drive to repair the wheelchair and the La Jolla Shores Surfing Association matched the money she raised.

To ensure there is always a wheelchair at the beach, Councilmember Sherri Lightner partnered with Council President Pro Tem Kevin Faulconer and Councilmember Todd Gloria to donate funds out of their office budgets to purchase three additional chairs.

“These beach wheelchairs can be life-changing,” said Councilmember Lightner, who represents District 1, which includes La Jolla. “We get letters from people saying that because of this program, they were able to put their feet in the ocean for the first time in 20 years.”

President Pro Tem Kevin L. Faulconer, who represents Pacific Beach, Mission Beach, Ocean Beach and Mission Bay, said it was critical to ensure that everyone is able to enjoy the city's rich beach culture.

"All San Diegans and visitors deserve the opportunity to enjoy our city's beaches, bays and natural wonders," he said. "These new beach wheelchairs will help beachgoers and surfers with disabilities to feel every bonfire, taste every s'more, watch every sunset and catch every wave."

"Everyone should have the opportunity to enjoy one of San Diego's greatest resources – our beaches," agreed Councilmember Todd Gloria. "Beach wheelchairs are a wonderful addition to the free amenities offered by the city to enhance accessibility for individuals with limited mobility."

Stacey LoMedico, director of San Diego's Park and Recreation Department, which oversees the free beach wheelchair program, applauded the generous donations from the councilmembers, the Disabled Services Advisory Council, the La Jolla Shores Surfing Association and Ocean's friends and family.

"By working together, we were able to fund this vitally important program without having to tap into our general fund," LoMedico said. "It's not just the right thing to do; it's also good for our local tourism economy. I can't tell you how often people write us to say that San Diego is their vacation destination of choice because of our free beach wheelchair program."

#### ABOUT THE PROGRAM

**Where to find them:** The wheelchairs are available at La Jolla Shores, Mission Beach, Ocean Beach and Pacific Beach. Because of the new wheelchairs, there are at least two manual wheelchairs at most locations. Mission Beach also has motorized wheelchairs that are free to the public.

**How to check them out:** Simply go to the main lifeguard tower at the above beaches and ask to use one of the wheelchairs. You may need to leave a driver's license or photo ID.

#### FEEDBACK FROM THE PUBLIC

- "Unbelievable the freedom that these chairs provide. It enabled me to enjoy my kids playing in the surf. I've had the beach without a beach chair and it's not an experience I want to repeat. Without this phenomenal program, San Diego would not be the vacation destination of choice for us."
- "San Diego is a class act for having this service. Thanks for everything."
- "I am from the Bay Area. I have always loved the beach and had to watch from far away. How exciting it was to be close to the water. Thanks for this great experience."
- "Thank you one thousand times over for providing access for my severely handicapped daughter to experience the beach and surf!"
- "An absolutely amazing experience...never thought I could "walk" beside the ocean again. I'm so grateful to whoever thought of this, funded it, and made it happen."

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