

The Rick Legacy: Planning, Designing and Engineering in San Diego Since 1927

Brian F. Mooney

As a city and region, San Diego comprises a variety of unique, individual communities and neighborhoods. Located in a natural environment with a strong physical connection to Mexico, this blend of values and culture defines its identity as “Paradise.”¹ Many communities and the region’s most iconic development projects have been planned, designed, and engineered by the Rick family and the engineering and planning firm they started in 1955. These communities include Scripps Ranch, La Costa, Rancho Bernardo, Rancho Peñasquitos, Loma Santa Fe, Liberty Station, Fairbanks Ranch, Carmel Valley (then known as North City West), Warner Springs Ranch, Black Mountain Ranch and high-profile developments including Qualcomm Stadium, numerous buildings on San Diego State University (SDSU) and the University of California San Diego (UCSD) campuses, the Chula Vista Bayfront, tribal lands, and downtown hotels.

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Rick Engineering Company headquarters on Friars Road, San Diego. Editor's collection.

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Glenn Rick: Planning San Diego

Glenn Rick came to San Diego from Cedar Rapids Iowa in 1927. Trained as a civil engineer at the University of Iowa and his father's home building business, he moved to San Diego to build houses. Shortly after arriving, he learned that the homes he was scheduled to build could not be financed due to the decline in the housing market during the late 1920s.² Rick became the Assistant City Planning Engineer to Kenneth Gardner, the City Planning Engineer in the newly formed City of San Diego's City Planning Department. Gardner, an associate of John Nolen, who prepared the first City of San Diego Comprehensive Plan in 1907, had been retained to update the plan in 1926. The San Diego City Council approved the update in 1927 and the new City Planning Department



Glenn Rick looking at housing distribution in San Diego.
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worked to implement the plan including a new Zoning Ordinance that divided the City into residential zones R-1, R-2 and R-4, commercial zones C-1 and C-2, and manufacturing zones of M-1 and M-2. The process was controversial and took several years to complete but eventually covered all neighborhoods.³

Over time, Glenn Rick was promoted to City Planning Engineer and in 1928 was named City Planning Director. He was responsible for the implementation of Nolen's 1927 vision throughout San Diego, including land use and transportation issues. In a local newspaper article published in 1936 and titled, "What Will San Diego Be Like in 1950? Planning Engineer Rick Sees Better Streets, More Civic Buildings, Park and Harbor Programs," Rick identified key issues for the city such as completing the Harbor Development Plan, extending the park system into densely populated neighborhoods, securing a sustainable water supply, developing a modern sanitation system, and solving the city's traffic and parking problems.⁴

Rick was known for promoting the planning growth of San Diego in a responsible and comprehensive way. In 1939, he hosted a radio show titled "Know Your San Diego." During the radio hour, Rick emphasized that San Diegans had always made up an enterprising community by balancing beauty with lifestyle and industry. He announced that the Consolidated Aircraft Corporation, under the direction of Major Reuben H. Fleet, would be creating additions to their factory along the Pacific Coast Highway that would be built with the intention of improving the corridor, so the City Planning Commission could readily approve the development. Rick also spoke about the importance of beautifying the waterfront and the development of Harbor Drive:

The plans for the development of this natural asset call for the continuation of Harbor Drive from Market Street around the Bay to Playa in Point Loma. The proper development of this 200-foot-wide waterfront drive will result in the most beautiful and practical asset this city has. Balboa Park is indeed a wonderful exhibit, with 1,400-acres filled with such things as a splendid zoo, golf courses, art gallery, and other cultural and recreational attractions. But what other city in the United States has the opportunity of developing waterfront drive such as San Diego has?⁵

World War II and The Rise of Mission Bay

Everything changed with the onset of World War II as the City and all planning functions focused on the war effort. Lucinda Eddy summarized the immediate impact of the war:

Almost overnight San Diego was transformed from a sleepy border town to a teeming wartime metropolis. *Life Magazine* and other national publications referred to San Diego as a "boom-town," but the *Saturday Evening Post* best described the tremendous changes taking place as the "Blitz-Boom." San Diego's major defense industry, aircraft, met the challenges of expanded production and began 24-hour, 7-day a week operations. . . . San Diego claimed the Navy's largest air base and the city's harbor housed the repair and operations base for many of the Navy's major aircraft carriers. U. S. Army and Marine Corps camps sprang up throughout the county to train the large numbers of incoming soldiers. The influx of civilian and military personnel caused the city's population to soar. By summer, 1941, the population had increased from 203,000, to more than 300,000, surpassing in little more than a year the projected growth for the next two decades.⁶



Mission Bay development, Aerial, 1949. ©SDHC OP: 14266-15.

Near the end of the war, the San Diego City Council feared that the Great Depression would return and attempted to identify ways the city could bolster its identity as a tourist destination. After two successful expositions in Balboa Park (1915 and 1935), San Diego needed a new attraction and identified Mission Bay.

Glenn Rick is probably best known as the “Father of Mission Bay.” The project was formally integrated into the city budget in 1944 and the San Diego City Council designated Rick to “supervise the work of converting Mission Bay State Park into a top-notch municipal playground.” The program came under significant scrutiny in a news article in the *New York Herald Tribune* (October 5, 1947) as well as in articles in Los Angeles and San Francisco claiming that San Diego was turning a “mud-hole into Coney Island at the cost of \$14,000,000.” Rick quickly challenged the inaccurate identification and degrading connection with a “recreation slum” like Coney Island with “lunch stands, beer gardens and hot dog stands.” Instead, the project called for the design of a natural looking bay oriented around swimming, sailing and water sports, complimented by exclusive, luxury hotels. Under his direction, Mission Bay came to fruition and remains as one of San Diego’s prized attractions.

Rick served as Planning Director until 1955 when he retired from the City and opened Glenn A. Rick and Sons (later renamed Rick Engineering Company) with his sons Wallace and William (Bill) Rick. While Glenn focused on planning, Bill led the civil engineering services and Wally managed the survey division.

Rick Family Ties

Glenn's two sons carried on the family company. Wally Rick, born in 1928 in San Diego, attended Point Loma High School and San Diego State University, before joining Glenn A. Rick and Sons. Through his professional dedication and his efforts as head of the land surveying and mapping division, many of the standards Wally set into place are still in practice today throughout the county. In 1972 Wally became President of the newly formed Mission Aerial also housed in the Rick offices to provide Aerial Mapping to the engineering firm and Bill became President of the renamed Rick Engineering Company. Wally served as a Vice President of the Rick Engineering Company.

The Career of William (Bill) Rick

Bill played an integral role in the development of San Diego much like his father. Originally enrolled at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Bill received a Bachelor's Degree in Civil Engineering from UCLA in 1949 and enlisted in the Air Force where he became a Second Lieutenant in the "Sanitary Engineering Division." He went on to become active in both civil engineering and planning organizations, and served on the Port of San Diego Board of Port Commissioners and Coastal Commission as an appointee of Mayor and later Governor Pete Wilson.⁸ In 1987, the California Society of Professional Engineers named Bill "Engineer of the Year" for his contributions in developing San Diego.

As president of Rick Engineering, Bill Rick became heavily involved in public service. He was appointed to the Board of Review for Land Development, City of San Diego; the Historical Sites Board; Park and Recreation Board; California Coastal Commission; San Diego Energy Advisory Board; and the Senate Advisory Committee on California/Mexico Business Relations. In the civic arena he was a director, trustee or officer for the American Cancer Society San Diego Chapter, Bishops School, Sharp Hospital Foundation, LEAD San Diego, UCSD Cancer Foundation, KPBS Advisory Board, Mission Bay Association, Maritime Association of San Diego, San Diego Yacht Club, Cuyamaca Club, University Club, Fronteras de las Californias, San Diego Dialogue, UCSD Board of Overseers, Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute and the Urban League. Bill



Mayor Pete presenting awards to San Diegans with historical concern, (left to right) Reverend Robert Stevens, Bill Rick, and Lorraine Sundberg. March 10, 1972, ©SDHC #UT86:J9556.

also wrote “Planning and Developing Waterfront Property” for the Urban Institute’s *Technical Bulletin* 49 in 1964.

One of Bill’s greatest contributions during his time of public service was his work with the Port Commission to build the San Diego Bay Convention Center. By the late 1970s, the City of San Diego had embarked on a major redevelopment of the downtown area. One key piece to that redevelopment would be a new convention center. There was one in Mission Valley at the Town and Country Hotel and another at Civic Center Plaza downtown. It became clear that there was a great opportunity for the City of San Diego to compete nationally for large conventions if they had a large and dramatic convention center.

After extensive debate and passage of a construction measure in 1983, a site was chosen along Harbor Drive and an architecture competition was established to choose the most unique and appropriate design. The firm of Canadian Architect Arthur Erickson was chosen and developed a concept of a ship along the harbor. Upon construction, however, commencement of the unique design uncovered major issues with water leaking into the sub-basement. Bill, who had been appointed to the Port Commission in 1981 by Mayor Pete Wilson, became chairman of the Port Convention Center Building committee. He identified a practical solution that put the project back on schedule to open in 1989. He commented

for an article in *San Diego Magazine* at the opening ceremonies; “I’ve had so many occasions in the last eight years where the world was going to come to an end on this job, that this is no great shakes of a problem to me. Having lived through the day when we thought we’d lost the whole foundation, plus a few other first order calamities, I’m not too panicky.”⁹

Community Developments

While Rick Engineering Company has a long history of collaborating on high-profile projects, they are perhaps best known for their legacy of planning San Diego’s iconic community developments.

Rancho Peñasquitos

In 1962, real estate developer and San Diego attorney Irvin Kahn acquired the 14,000-acre parcel known as Rancho Peñasquitos with the intent of building a 150,000-resident planned community. He retained Rick Engineering Company to develop a Master Plan. The community plan included a golf course, open space (what has become Peñasquitos Canyon Regional Park), commercial centers and numerous distinctive residential neighborhoods.



Irvin Kahn looks at a map of Rancho los Peñasquitos, 1962. ©SDHC UT85: c2821.

Scripps Ranch

In 1968, Macco Corporation and its subsidiary, Leadership Homes, purchased the 1,180-acre Miramar Ranch from Margaret Scripps Hawkins. The Master Plan was approved by the City Council in 1970 and in 1975, the ranch was sold to the Corky McMillan Company. The newly developed Scripps Ranch community petitioned the City of San Diego to form the Scripps Miramar Ranch Community Planning Group in 1977 and retained Rick Engineering Company to prepare a comprehensive Community Plan. The City Council officially adopted the Rick's Community Plan in 1978, which included extensive preservation of canyons, numerous parks, schools, and the eucalyptus forest.

La Costa

In the mid 1970s, Rick Engineering was retained to help plan the community of La Costa in Carlsbad. Originally established in 1960, La Costa was one of the first resorts to provide a full-service spa in association with La Costa Inn and championship golf course and tennis facilities. The original resort was developed by real estate entrepreneur Allard Roen who was involved with the Desert Inn in Las Vegas through Moe Dalitz.¹⁰ The firm's role was to plan and develop a residential and commercial component including more than 20,000 homes in a variety of neighborhoods.



Julian Burke, Jack Poole and Allard Roen (left to right) signing La Costa deal, March 10, 1981, ©SDHC #UT91:R2799 #3A-4.

Fairbanks Ranch

In 1977, Ray Watt began assembling portions of the original Douglas Fairbanks Rancho located southwest of Rancho Santa Fe. Fairbanks and his wife, Mary Pickford, were famous silent movie stars in the early 1900s. Fairbanks is best known for his roles as Zorro and Robin Hood while Pickford was identified as “America’s sweetheart.” Watt hired Rick Engineering Company, in association with Mooney Lettieri and Associates, to complete the Master Plan, including residential homes and a commercial center in association with the country club. Per an agreement with the City of San Diego, the plan included equestrian facilities to hold events for the 1984 Olympics held in Los Angeles.



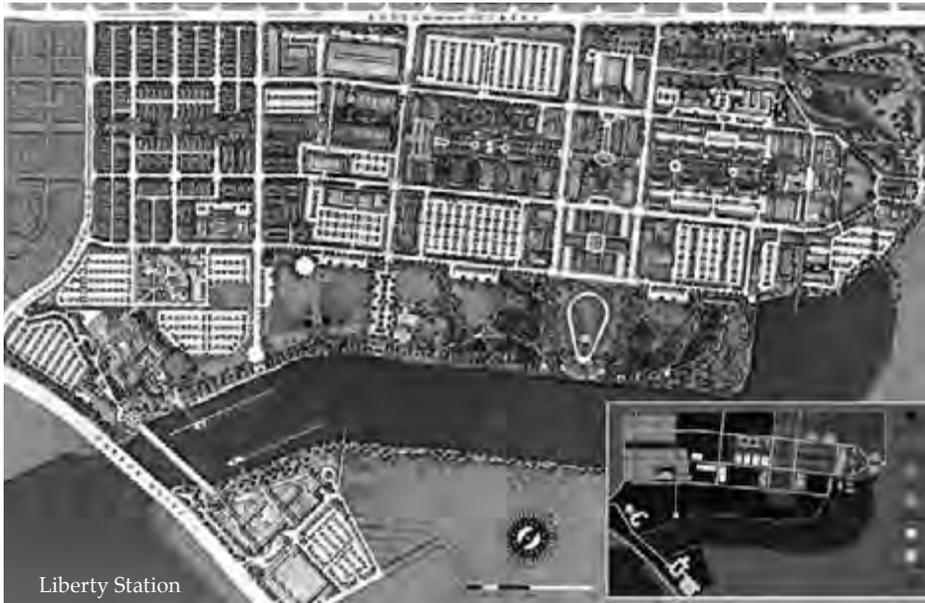
A sign marking Zorro Ranch owned by Douglas Fairbanks, 1977. ©SDHC UT90: O9329.

Chula Vista Bayfront

In 1986, Rick Engineering Company began preliminary engineering for the Chula Vista Bayfront, one of the last high-profile development opportunities to create a distinctive destination for the public on San Diego Bay. This 400-acre federal preserve, commercial, residential and resort development required decades of master planning, along with Coastal Commission and neighboring jurisdictional coordination. Rick Engineering Company continues to provide multiple services including planning and engineering to the City of Chula Vista, the San Diego Unified Port District, and private developers of the bayfront.

Liberty Station

In 1993, the U.S. Navy announced its intention to close the Naval Training Center (NTC) under the 1990 Base Closure Act. NTC, originally built in 1921, served as the major training facility for the navy through World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. In 1997, the City of San Diego retained Rick Engineering Company to prepare a Master Plan that would preserve the historical integrity of the property while establishing new residential, commercial, and open space. A special focus of the Master Plan for what would become known as Liberty Station, included preservation of the parade grounds, historic buildings, and architectural guidelines that were integral to the property’s history. The resulting



redevelopment yielded the creation of 350 dwelling units, 500,000 square feet of office/research and development area, over 100,000 square feet of mixed-use area, two hotels with 1,000-room capacity, and a Metropolitan Wastewater Laboratory.

Beyond communities that Glenn, Bill, and Wally Rick personally served, the Rick family legacy also lives on through the next generation of their company. No longer run by a Rick family member, but still showing the family name on its door, Rick Engineering Company continues to expand throughout California, Arizona, and Colorado.

NOTES

1. Roger Showley, *Perfecting Paradise*, (San Diego: Heritage Media, 1999).
2. Glenn A. Rick, *San Diego 1927-1955 Recollections of a City Planner*, (San Diego, 1977): 41.
3. *Ibid.*, 48.
4. *Ibid.*, 116.
5. Glenn A. Rick, *Know Your San Diego*, KGB, San Diego, 1939, Radio transcription.
6. Lucinda Eddy, "War Comes to San Diego," *The Journal of San Diego History*, (Spring 1993, Volume 39): 51-119.
7. William Rick, "Mission Bay: An Engineer's Vision Come True," *The Journal of San Diego History*, (Winter 2002, Volume 48): 26-37.
8. "A Collection of Life Member Memoirs," *American Society of Civil Engineers* (2015): 23-25.
9. Bill Owens, "The Unconventional Center," *San Diego Magazine*, (1990): 216.
10. Don Bauder, "La Costa Developer Merv Adelson Dead at 85," *San Diego Reader*, Sept. 10, 2015.