

The Beverly Hills Brand

An Interview with Julian A. Gold, Mayor of Beverly Hills,
and Julie Wagner, Chief Executive Officer, Beverly Hills Conference and Visitors Bureau



Julie Wagner under the iconic Beverly Hills sign

EDITORS' NOTE Julian Gold, M.D. was elected to the Beverly Hills City Council in 2011. He previously served on the Recreation and Parks Commission and on the Traffic and Parking Commission, of which he was Chairperson. He is a graduate of Team Beverly Hills class of 2002. He served as Vice Mayor in 2014. Mayor Gold graduated from the N.Y.U. School of Medicine. A Board Certified Anesthesiologist for 30 years, he is Co-Chairman of the Department of Anesthesiology at Cedars-Sinai and Co-Managing Partner of General Anesthesia Specialists Partnership Medical Group. He is a Professor of Clinical Anesthesiology at the U.C.L.A. School of Medicine and U.S.C. Keck School of Medicine. He is a former member of the Board of Directors of Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, and has served on many committees.



Julian A. Gold

Julie Wagner has held her current post since June of 2010. Prior to joining BHCVB, she spent 18 years at Hilton Worldwide in a variety of marketing capacities, including Director of International Marketing and, most recently, as Senior Director of Brand Marketing for Hilton's luxury and lifestyle brands. Prior to that, she worked for Princess Cruises. She received her B.S. in English from University of California, Los Angeles.

INSTITUTION BRIEF The Beverly Hills Conference & Visitors Bureau (lovebeverlyhills.com; BHCVB) is the city's destination marketing organization with resources for visitors, members of the media, and travel trade. The Beverly Hills Visitor Center provides a host of customized amenities including exclusive citywide offers, complimentary concierge services, Beverly Hills branded merchandise, and a historical image gallery. It's the perfect place to begin exploring the many sites and experiences Beverly Hills has to offer.

What excited you about getting involved in public service in Beverly Hills?

Gold: Beverly Hills is arguably the best known luxury city in the world and we have an odd relationship with it. We're living in this aspirational city for so many people and, at the same time, we're residents and we have all the requirements that every other resident elsewhere has.

If streets are paved, parks are pretty, police and fire are supportive, and there is a good school system, most people in a community are happy.

They often are less interested in some of the larger issues that face the state, which are complicated.

We on the council, as stewards of the community, need to balance these two. Seventy-five percent of the revenue that comes to the city comes from the business community. That revenue comes because we have a great environment that people want to visit. As a result, the city can provide superb services, which contributes to making Beverly Hills an ideal destination.

With police and fire, we have critical response times under three minutes. Where many cities in a commercial area will clean streets on a weekly basis, we clean the streets every night; the same with trash pick-up.

I got involved with public service by first spending six years on the traffic and parking commission, which introduced me to the public process. Then I considered running for City Council.

It really is about representing a small community and an international brand. It has been a great ride so far.

Is what the city offers well understood internationally?

Gold: The international persona is understood. What we would like to have better understood is that our price point isn't always high. We're developing parts of town that many of the residents go to because they don't necessarily want to eat at Spago every night.

How broad is the market when it comes to bringing in conventions and meetings?

Wagner: We've ramped up our sales efforts over the past few years. We have one really big conference that comes in every year and that brings in about 5,000 people. We have 2,200 rooms so a lot of that ends up in the surrounding areas, but the compression factor is amazing.

One thing that is projected moving forward is that incentive travel and the smaller meeting market is going to continue to grow and remain strong, so we have tried to solidify our efforts there.

There are always going to be groups that are willing to pay more than \$200 per night but that's where it narrows. Most groups are looking for \$200 per night or less and breakfast. Our average group rates are around \$300.

Also, because we don't have a convention center or an official conference center, people think of us in terms of the maximum one particular hotel can hold. However, all

of our hotels are so close that it's easy to station a conference or incentive group at one hotel, like The Beverly Hilton, which has 569 rooms, and divvy it up to neighboring hotels, depending on the parameters. We have a number of meeting and public space facilities in the city, and can comfortably handle groups of up to 1,500.

We also have a lot of interesting and private venue spaces so some of the more concentrated break-outs and special sessions can happen all over town.

How was Beverly Hills able to remain insulated from the financial crisis?

Gold: Luxury cities are usually late in and early out of recessions, and that was our experience. We did cut our general fund budget by about 9 percent during the recession. There were 100 positions out of almost 1,000 that were eliminated by either attrition or reassignment. There was reduction in noncritical city services.

Also, the financial policies that drive this city are pretty strong although we're all struggling with the unfunded liability issues. Even in that context, we've reserved dollars against that because our revenues have been strong enough. We started this year's budget with a base that was lower than the year before. That comes from strong management, directed by the council.

What kind of impact does BHCVB need to have?

Wagner: The good thing about us is we're not a membership-based organization so we can equally represent everyone in town and our role is always going to be to drive tourism and get people to spend money so it results in tax revenue for the city.

Our organization has morphed over the years. We are different during the recession than we are when the economy is booming.

We're focused now on making sure we have the right infrastructure in place. We want to ensure our sales and marketing capabilities, and the foundation – the team – is all in place. Our relationship with the city is one where they have confidence in us and understand the importance of the economic engine we represent.

Also, it's about touching on the international reach we have as a brand. We have global representation in top and emerging markets, and are continuously looking to expand so that we remain top of mind for international travelers seeking luxury accommodations and experiences. ●