

A Conversation With . . .

Development Services Director Craig Beck

Craig Beck, director of the Long Beach Development Services Department, has been climbing the ranks of local public service over the past 22 years. In fact, he's continuing the family legacy of service set by his father, Skip Beck, a former fire chief here.

During college, Beck was a dispatcher for the Long Beach Fire Department, where he learned about the city's geographic layout and how to keep his cool in a hectic environment. After graduating from California State University, Long Beach, he worked in the city's neighborhood services department and moved up the ranks. He has served as a community development analyst, financial services officer and development project manager, as well as the acting department head for community development, a position he says exposed him to various development issues.

As the director of development services, he not only oversees the often controversial and misunderstood redevelopment agency, where he previously served as its manager, but all the operations involved with planning and building. This places him in a position of overseeing nearly all development in a city of nearly 500,000 people. This is an enormous responsibility with significant challenges. The fact that he has been successful with a relatively small staff is proof of his management abilities and organizational skills.

Despite this position of power, however, there are several checks and balances in



Long Beach Development Services Department Director Craig Beck. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

place. While some have called him the "development czar," he rejects that description. Instead, he humbly takes credit for managing a "talented, professional" group of employees, and working with dedicated citizens who serve on several boards and commissions involved with development services.

Beck believes his experience with neighborhoods is his greatest strength. Having worked on numerous local issues over the years, he says, gives him a unique perspective when working on projects in the city's various and diverse communities.

Business Journal Publisher George Economides and Staff Writer Stacy Clements met with Beck last week to discuss numerous issues pertaining to the department, including the budget, future develop-

ment and the redevelopment project areas.

LBBJ: How did the development services department evolve?

Beck: Traditionally, community development had redevelopment as a component in it. When the [former] city manager left, the director of community development [Pat West was named] city manager. In that transition, one of the changes that he made was moving the redevelopment component out of community development and then adding it to planning and building. So, we had planning, building and redevelopment and came up with the name "Development Services" to try to reflect those three pieces of the process.

I've been in this position almost two years. We've been trying to create a cohesive community vision [through] the development process in this department. That's been a little bit challenging, given the budget environment that we're in – not only locally with our General Fund, but the state raid on redevelopment [agencies].

LBBJ: How many employees are there in development services?

Beck: It was at about 120, but we went through a number of cuts [during] this last budget cycle, and it may be down to 100.

LBBJ: That's quite a drop.

Beck: Yes. Since I've been here over the past two years, [about] a 23 percent reduction in staffing.

LBBJ: How many are in redevelopment?

Beck: I'm very proud of this – we run a

very thin redevelopment operation. If you look at the amount of money that comes in and goes out, our admin costs are under 8 percent. For the amount of work that comes out of that operation, [there] are very few employees. If you look at this organization outside of redevelopment, it's very similar. We're running [with a] pretty light staff.

LBBJ: Tell us about the redevelopment areas. It looks like there are seven, but only three are active because only three are funded?

Beck: Actually, all seven are still active under redevelopment law – let's use that as a designation. Some are coming up to end soon. . . . Every project area has a life and their [termination] is coming up soon. Los Altos is newer. The four major project areas are North, Central, Downtown and West, just from the amount of money they generate and the type of activities that they have.

LBBJ: When these project areas end, does the property tax revert to the General Fund?

Beck: The short answer is yes. The longer answer is for a period of time it will payoff any existing debts that are on the books, but as soon as those debts are paid off then, yes, it does transfer to the General Fund.

LBBJ: So that would be huge for the General Fund?

Beck: If every redevelopment project area went away, it would be about \$20 million. But the benefit, from my perspective, is we get to keep upwards of \$90 million locally on top of the \$20 [million]. The net is about \$90 million. That \$90 million goes into infrastructure projects: [it] helps build fire stations, police stations, parks, roadways, medians – some of those quality of life things.

LBBJ: Can you extend a project area?

Beck: You can extend the life. There's a very specific process that you have to go through. Basically, redevelopment is a tool to address blight. It was put in place by the California legislature to allow local communities to keep local dollars to address blighting influence – that's both physical and economic blight.

LBBJ: And 40 percent of the city is blight?

Beck: Forty percent of the city is in a redevelopment area.

LBBJ: Why is Atlantic Avenue in Bixby Knolls considered a blighted area?

Beck: I think it was that commercial corridor. I wasn't in the position then, but I think when it was adopted there were some blighting influences along the corridor having to do with commercial businesses.

LBBJ: Do you remember how the North PAC area got the port? Is that because you needed the money from the port to fund the projects?

Beck: I'm not really sure of the thought process that went in behind it. Again, from my perspective, I think they were looking at where there were remaining blight influences.

LBBJ: I can't imagine the port as blighted. There's so much development always going on there.

Beck: Well, I think there are areas in the port that need to be addressed. . . . From an infrastructure perspective, there are some needs down there especially along the south waterfront where the Queen Mary is [in] the Queensway Bay area.

LBBJ: Does one redevelopment area do better than another? Have you seen more progress in one?

Beck: It has to do with the life of a project area. Certainly the Downtown has been around longer, so you've probably seen more change. . . . It's been active for 30 years and you're seeing the results of that activation for 30 years. Look at all the tremendous things that are going on in North Long Beach right now – that's a much younger project area (about 12 years old). You have the infrastructure improvements happening; you're now seeing developers come in [who are] interested in some of the development sites. It's really the evolution of a project area.

LBBJ: You finally have a grocery store . . .

Beck: Yes. Big Saver opened without redevelopment assistance. There was no hard money that went in there, but I think that's the goal. Let's improve an area so there are those private dollars that get invested in that area. We don't have enough money to address everything, so there has to be that private investment to make a difference. I really point to Big Saver as a great example. Target store is another good example where that private money's going into North Long Beach and really starting to address some of the issues.

LBBJ: Back in the 1970s, I believe, there was a lawsuit filed by the west industrial project area. Are things settled on the westside?

Beck: My approach to this position, and my approach [when I served] as redevelopment bureau manager, is to really come from a community perspective. If you think about how I grew up in this organization, with neighborhoods being a focal point, I really work with the community. We have excellent

communication with all of our PACs – Westside included.

We focus on what their needs are; we bring forward their agenda items and their issues. Certainly a bank is something we're working on and a drugstore is another thing that we're working on to try to bring to the Westside. . . . Some of those banking needs and grocery store needs are more for the residential areas that are a little bit north of PCH.

LBBJ: So the Westside area's pretty calm?

Beck: The biggest Westside project is the storm drain improvement that's going on. It's going to be a \$15 [million] to \$18 million project. We're up lining storm drains; we're increasing the capacity of the pump station. We have a really good working relationship with the Westside. They have certain priorities they want us to look at here in the coming months – a lot of them have to do with aesthetics. Are there areas to add medians? Is there street work that needs to be done? Is there sidewalk work? Is there public art that can be placed to help enhance that [area]? Are there gateway elements? Are there trees? These are some of the priorities.

LBBJ: Do you work with the Magnolia Industrial Group (MIG)?

Beck: It's been a while. The agency does work with them, probably not on a daily basis. One of the recent transitions in this budget cycle is the transition of economic development to redevelopment, so we're taking on some of those responsibilities. [But] not so much the BIDs (business improvement districts), which is what MIG is. One of the actions that have come forward out of the agency is to work more closely with the BIDs in our project areas.

We've done a retail-use analysis in Bixby Knolls – the HyettPalma study was recently completed. There was another one done in downtown by Strategic Economics Inc. – that's another really good study. It talks about gap analysis and what's appropriate for growth moving forward. With both those studies, we looked at both the DLBA (Downtown Long Beach Associates) and the BKBIA (Bixby Knolls Business Improvement Association) and said, "Where are their gaps in their funding? How can we help them address some of these economic development tools?" The [RDA] board took action to enhance both their budgets, so we now have an economic development scope of work with the DLBA and Bixby Knolls to bring forward some of these initiatives.

For longevity, it's the business community that's going to have to address some of these issues. Let's take downtown. If the Downtown Project Area ends in seven years, what is that transition? Who's going to be there to help address some of these issues? I think the DLBA is going to be that entity.

LBBJ: How much did the RDA allocate for the DLBA and BKBIA?

Beck: Those amounts were \$270,000 and \$138,600, [respectively].

LBBJ: Who's going to decide what happens with Pine Avenue? There have been many studies over the years. Is it the residents, the business, the DLBA, the RDA? Is everyone on the same page?

Beck: I think it's all being pulled together cohesively. We've talked a little about the Downtown Community Plan, [which] is going to address some of the development standards moving forward; it talks globally about what we want to see. Where is the office need? Where is the residential need? A lot of people talk about retail. Honestly, to drive the retail that many people are looking for in downtown, we need to look at creating more of a concentration of residents. One of the goals of the agency is to increase residential capacity.

LBBJ: We have the units; we just don't have the people filling these units?

Beck: I don't think we have the units. Just as an example, a typical retail model looks at 35,000 of their customers in a geographic area. That geographic area is usually within a mile, maybe as far as three. If you draw a circle in downtown, because of the water, we don't have 35,000 customers for these retailers. To get that many, you almost have to go all the way down to Belmont Shore along the coast.

[The Community Plan] is an important document because it will not only talk about the development standards moving forward but [also includes] a "Program EIR" (environmental impact report). A program EIR says, "If this is your plan for downtown, these are the levels of density. Let's evaluate the maximum impact, if every square inch got built out." So we look at what the traffic demands are going to be? What are the environmental impacts going to be? Where is there going to be noise and shadows?

All of the things an EIR would typically analyze are being analyzed in this program EIR. One of the longest processes in any development cycle is the CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) document. An

EIR typically takes between 12 and 18 months. . . . One of the things this program EIR will do is shorten the CEQA process. Our goal is to be poised when the economic cycle turns around to be able to put shovels in the ground.

LBBJ: But you've already got projects approved? Isn't AndersonPacific's Shoreline Gateway project [on Ocean Boulevard and Alamitos Avenue] ready to go?

Beck: As soon as the market conditions turn around. That's the only large-scale project that's actually entitled.

LBBJ: Wasn't there something near the Art Exchange?

Beck: That was never entitled. That's something we've been trying to get a developer to take ownership of. We've been working closely with the university; we'd love to see some student housing in downtown.

LBBJ: What about P-T Lofts, is that ever going to happen?

Beck: I think that they're caught up in the economic cycle like everyone else.

LBBJ: It could be three years before we see any activity, so now's the time to attract other developers to start in three or four years?

Beck: Hopefully, in two. Why don't we go back to Pine Avenue? The other thing that's come forward on Pine Avenue is what's called a Streetscape Master Plan; it's what we did for The Promenade. Before we started that construction, we did a master plan for The Promenade. We're doing the same thing for Pine Avenue. We want to look at the streetscape, [the] medians, the sidewalks – that pedestrian and public realm. Are there areas to expand seating opportunities for the restaurants? Where do we put street trees? Are the sidewalks the right width? Should the streets be wider or narrower? These are all the things that we're analyzing right now. It's been a great group [of] community members, business owners, transit officials, and planning and redevelopment folks. We should have a draft plan for that pretty quickly.

LBBJ: When you say the community's involved in the decision-making process, how big of a group are we talking about?

Beck: There's a group of about 20 working on the draft plan. They're community members. . . . It's a really good collection [of people]. [After] the draft plan is really when the widespread community process [begins]. We will go out and have community meetings on the full draft plan and get further input and

refinement. The timeline is pretty quick, by late January we should have a full draft plan put together. I'm [expecting] it to get adopted second quarter.

LBBJ: Do you have any commercial brokers on the committee for the Downtown Community Plan?

Beck: I don't believe so. That's a good question. We did have commercial brokers working with Strategic Economics Inc. to develop that gap analysis that went into this plan.

LBBJ: What's going on with the Edison building on Long Beach Boulevard and 1st Street? The city bought it and it's sitting empty.

Beck: It is sitting empty. It's one of my priorities. We're getting ready to go to council with an update. The council approved a developer, Howard CDM, to buy it and convert it to office. I think as they've looked at the office market, they don't believe it's workable today and they're coming up with an alternative concept.

LBBJ: The property's been sitting there for quite a while, right? Didn't the city get it as part of the Edison deal?

Beck: Yes, as part of the franchise extension.

LBBJ: It's been five, six, seven years.

Beck: At least that, maybe longer. It really needs to be reenergized. That's a dead zone in downtown. We really need to address that.

LBBJ: For years they talked about connecting Pine to East Village. With a future Art Exchange, you've got a nice connection. Right now, East Village still seems isolated.

Beck: There are a lot of good things going on over there.

LBBJ: The turnover of small businesses is too high. They don't get the traffic flow. Let's get back to Pine Avenue. One of the concerns we've heard is the Vault 350. How can people who are new to the city come in and receive quite a bit of RDA money. Wasn't it \$200,000 or \$300,000 for the outdoor signage?

Beck: It was a facade [improvement for around that amount] and a business loan up to \$500,000.

LBBJ: How do you decide who gets the money? Is it you or the RDA board? Obviously the background checks are important.

Beck: It's a couple things. The economic development loan function is now under the redevelopment agency. The sources of loan funds are redevelopment funds, CDBG (com-

munity development block grant) dollars, some EDA (economic development area) funding and some of the loan repayments. Those are the sources. We've created a loan committee [comprised of] a redevelopment agency boardmember, a community development advisory committee boardmember and a banker. Those three folks will review all loan applications.

We wanted to bring back a program that used to be offered called the Capital Availability Program. It was small; I think it was \$35,000 or \$40,000. It was used to help stimulate small-business interest. The agency also used to have something called a Key Tenant Loan Program – a majority of operations on Pine Avenue had received funding under that in the past.

LBBJ: A lot of them didn't repay the loan.

Beck: Some of them didn't. But we wanted to resurrect that because we believe that there are some prime opportunities to fill spaces in downtown with some key tenants. There's interest there and if there's a way that the agency could utilize some of its resources . . .

LBBJ: But you're putting a community plan together, which hasn't been finalized.

Beck: It's not as specific as what you're talking about.

LBBJ: But does the community plan say that the residents and the business people want jazz clubs or entertainment clubs on Pine Avenue? Is that part of the plan?

Beck: [Vault 350] is an entertainment venue; it will have jazz and other musical opportunities. I think you'll see connection to the community, convention opportunities.

LBBJ: So this is something that's going to help Pine Avenue?

Beck: This location at 4th [Street] and Pine has been pretty dead ever since the [original] Vault closed down. Creating some new energy there is important because it will help fill in some of the gaps on Pine Avenue. You're going to start generating that foot traffic.

LBBJ: Are the residents at the Walker and Kress buildings in favor of what you're doing with the Vault?

Beck: I haven't heard anyone say, "We don't want the venue." In fact, there have been a couple of tours provided to downtown residents. I have heard some concerns about the facade work. This group coming into the Vault, so far, they're doing everything the right way. They've pulled off all the "ginger-

bread" [work] on the inside; they've exposed the gold leaf, egg dart ceiling tiles; they're trying to bring the magnificence of what that used to be. When they went through the remodel in the 1960s, they just slapped all that granite over what was really a beautiful, beautiful exterior. If you saw the original bank building, which was the Bank of Italy, it was as pretty or prettier than F&M Bank. Being inside this venue and seeing what they're trying to create there, we're very optimistic about the activity there.

LBBJ: Earlier you talked about economic development and working with the DLBA and the BKBIA. Has there been any thought about helping the restaurants in downtown?

Beck: The agency's here to support the restaurants. We've done it in the past through key tenant loans. The restaurants have received loans through the city.

LBBJ: You've got a good core to really make Pine Avenue a restaurant row.

Beck: A lot of positives are happening. There are areas that we can help and there are areas that we can't help. The areas that we can, I want to be there and be a partner.

LBBJ: Is there anything else in redevelopment going on?

Beck: You asked about development sites: there are development opportunities at The Promenade; there are development opportunities probably on Broadway and Long Beach Boulevard; there are a couple spots on Ocean. . .

LBBJ: How many people do you need to attract retailers? Is it 35,000?

Beck: A retail model is 35,000.

LBBJ: And what do we have now?

Beck: That's a good question. [About] 12,000.

LBBJ: So we're a long ways off?

Beck: We might be a little higher than that.

LBBJ: Is it 12,000 units or people?

Beck: [I believe], 10,000 units were brought on line in the past five years. We're looking to bring another 10,000 [units] in the next five years.

LBBJ: You're talking 35,000 people living in those units?

Beck: Give or take, yes. That's a national model. That's what we got from the retailers. One retailer we worked with was Trader Joe's. We courted Trader Joe's for almost two years, trying to get them into downtown. They gave us their retail model and said, "Show us our customers."

LBBJ: So, the types of retailers that many residents would like probably aren't going to come in until we get more residential development.

Beck: I think they're going to want to see more density from their customer base. That can be an office worker, too. I don't think it's just that resident. They want to see their customers.

LBBJ: Can you put any residential on the south side of Queensway Bay?

Beck: No. But I don't want to just focus on downtown because there are some really great things going on [elsewhere]. Let's just highlight a couple things in North Long Beach. We talked about redevelopment and how it can benefit the city from an infrastructure perspective. We're building a new Fire Station 12 – that's going to be on Artesia [Boulevard]. We look at Artesia as being one of those corridors in North Long Beach that we're really working toward improving. Long Beach Boulevard has come a long way . . . [and so has] Atlantic Avenue.

There's another restaurant, commercial site going in at Atlantic and Artesia on the northeast corner. The agency's involved with a developer there: the plans are coming forward, so we see that breaking ground hopefully in the next year. The North Village Center at Atlantic and South [Street] is coming to the agency board on [December] 7 for approval of the EIR, which is a major milestone in the project life.

LBBJ: Have you selected a developer for that?

Beck: Yes. We've been negotiating with a developer for almost . . . two years. We have a development agreement almost finalized and we hope to bring that to the board probably in January. We have plans to build a new north library up there, so there are lots of positives going on in the Village Center. We're continuing to do some median work on Atlantic, on Long Beach Boulevard [and] on Artesia. We're working with Paramount Petroleum at Paramount and Artesia to do a great landscaping project on the corner.

LBBJ: What about parkland?

Beck: Davenport Park – the original phase was five acres – we're getting ready to go forward with another five-acre phase there. There [have] been a number of pocket parks that have been done. We're now also looking at Houghton Park and how we can work to improve some of the facilities. There's about a five-acre park [at] Del Amo [Boulevard]

and Oregon [Avenue] coming on line; we're going through the final elements of what that design's going to be. We'll get that bid out and constructed in the short term. [There are] some really positive things going on from a community perspective. The Village Center is going to be a great mixed-use project, which will have retail, residential space and the library.

LBBJ: Are you going to get a Starbucks or It's A Grind up there? I don't think there's one coffee shop in North Long Beach.

Beck: I think you'll see a coffee shop. The Artesia and Atlantic folks have been talking to It's A Grind.

There's [also] great opportunity for some more sit-down restaurants. . . . [Another development is] Marshalls in Bixby Knolls Center. That's not only Marshalls but it's also the facades in the back. Those are kind of dilapidated.

LBBJ: When you go in and help an area out, like you're doing in North Long Beach, do you communicate with the police department? People need to feel safe shopping and dining.

Beck: I think it takes a community to address crime and I don't know that suppression is always the answer. It's been helpful to add a north police station and enhance what was up there. I look forward to working with the next police chief to try to address any community concerns. [Note: refer to chart, Page 22, listing demolished buildings and the criminal activity those buildings previously attracted.]

LBBJ: What about the Poly High area? Is there anything going on there?

Beck: In our Central Project Area, we took out an old, dilapidated gas station on Atlantic and PCH. We took it down and provided more parking for teachers, we did [some] landscape and we did a dedicated right-turn lane to improve traffic flow. We're doing a similar project on the other end of Poly. We're trying to give Poly a little bit of exposure to PCH because you can't see it from PCH. The other piece is at MLK (Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue) – the backside of the school, we're going to do a similar landscaping project there. New medians have gone in on MLK. McBride Park should break ground in the next six months. There's a Rosa Parks Park at Alamitos.

LBBJ: What about your money situation? Do you have enough money to do everything you're talking about?

Beck: So far, we do. It was tough to have a \$36 million hit [from the state].

LBBJ: They're just borrowing it, right?

Beck: No. What the state has done in the legislation is essentially take \$1.7 billion from redevelopment agencies. That impact to Long Beach is about \$36 million – \$30 million in fiscal year 2010 and another \$6 million in fiscal year 2011. To address the \$30 million in fiscal year 2010, we borrowed from our housing allocation. We borrowed \$20 million from our set aside and we have to pay that back every year, so I have five years to pay that back.

LBBJ: That must have upset the housing advocates.

Beck: Some of them weren't happy, but in the long run they were able to look at their cash flow and it wasn't going to impact any housing projects. Well, it was going to slow some down, but ultimately the projects were still going to get built. The agency will be paying back \$4 million annually for five years. They'll get it all back, but it's a loss to the agency. In the actual bill (Prop. 1A), the state has offered to allow agencies to extend the life of their project area another year, so they're saying, "You can get this money back on the back end."

LBBJ: Can they come after it again?

Beck: There's nothing to prevent them from doing that. The CRA (California Redevelopment Association), in collaboration with the League of [California] Cities, filed a lawsuit in October. The last lawsuit filed by the CRA was successful. The first state take [from redevelopment agencies] was \$350 million. That lawsuit was successful. I think the state believes that they had a legal mechanism to do it the second time. The amount grew from \$350 million to \$1.7 billion.

LBBJ: So, it's tough for you to do much advanced planning. You can plan all you want, but if the state keeps taking money, a lot of these projects aren't going to happen.

Beck: We do a three-year budget cycle. In this last take [from the state], we had to delay and cancel projects. We were working on an acquisition for development at Atlantic and Willow that had to be delayed. There are real impacts. I really see the value of redevelopment – it allows the local community to keep its property taxes here and spend it on local issues.

LBBJ: Are you happy with where you're at right now with redevelopment?

Beck: A lot of positive things are going on.

We want to continue the momentum. We're always looking at ways to improve our communication, not only with our PAC members but also with the broader community. We try to highlight some of the projects going on in our newsletter. . . . We're trying to get people to understand the agendas.

We have a really good team in this department. Are there things that we can do better? There are always things that we can improve on and we're striving to do that.

LBBJ: You have a customer service survey online. How are the results?

Beck: We've talked a lot about the economy and it's certainly impacted our operations. Of the three operations, the planning and building functions are funded out of the development services fund. Those are all permit-fee driven. We've seen a drop off in some of that activity and therefore a drop off in some of the permit-fee revenue, and a loss of staff as a result. But even in this slow economy, we're still seeing a little more than 51,000 customers here on the 4th floor (at City Hall). That's tremendous.

LBBJ: We're talking about a 12-month period?

Beck: This last fiscal year. This is one of the prouder stats that we have: almost 52,000 inspections were performed last year [and] 99 percent were done within 24 hours of being requested. That's a tremendous [example] of our ability to get out there and work with the community and get our inspections done. You talked about working together. We want to ensure that the collaboration between the fire department, the public works department, financial management (from a business license perspective) and the health department, while not all of them have people sitting here on a regular basis, all are involved in the permit processing cycle.

How those plans go through the process is key to us, and one of the reasons that we've refined our customer service survey. We've seen some good results. On a monthly basis, I have my team give me not only the summaries that we've received but also every comment that was written. We get some really good comments about the professionalism of the people at the counter and their ability to help people. That's the [area] we're striving the most. We can't always say, "yes." It's about our ability to work through problems and make sure that when it's a "no," people understand why.

We're still being criticized about our wait

times. To address that, we've implemented a reservation system. You can call ahead and make an appointment. You never quite know where that flow's going to be. You can come in today at 10 o'clock, it may be slow; you can come in tomorrow at 10 o'clock, it may be super busy. We're really trying to get people used to those appointments so then we can help manage their time and their wait time.

We did a conversion of our permitting system – it's called Hanson. The older system was a mainframe, HP-based system. . . . It was a major undertaking and I appreciate all the work technology services has done. We're still trying to pull out some of the tweaks because that system has to talk to three other systems. Some of that interconnectivity has been difficult. It took us a little while to work through the payment process because when you pay, it's a different system. We're getting some critique on that. We have a tech services person assigned here so we're really hopeful that we'll address some of those wait times.

LBBJ: What's the reservation number?

Beck: 562/570-LBDS (5237)

LBBJ: Manpower is really important on the planning side?

Beck: That's been one of my biggest struggles is that balance between revenue versus need because we are a self-supported organization – there's no General Fund in my planning and building group.

LBBJ: If I want to open a business, I can go to the 4th floor and they'll tell me what I need to do?

Beck: We would encourage a business owner to come in and sit down with us – they can meet with a zoning staff person at the counter. They can sit down with a building person and the businessperson can say, "This is my general layout." It doesn't even have to be plans; it can be just be a general layout. They can say, "Well, you need to be aware of ADA issues for restrooms." They can have that dialogue so when that business owner walks out of here, and they engage a contractor or an architect or whatever they need to do to get their business up and running, now they're a little better informed so they can ask the right questions.

LBBJ: So you're encouraging businesses to come first before they hire a contractor.

Beck: Absolutely. Seek out that information. Or if they have a really good relationship with their contractor, the contractor can come in and do that, too. The biggest issues that we find out there are two things: one, a

business owner hires a contractor [who] maybe isn't the most conscientious, and two, that contractor doesn't come in and pull permits. So we're going in after the fact for a business entity – all they want to do is open so they can start doing their operation and making some money. I completely appreciate and understand that, but we're faced with the a situation where illegal construction work has happened without a permit.

A business owner has certain interests; a city has interests and wants to make sure [the building's] safe, habitable and it meets all the safety codes and building codes; and maybe a contractor who didn't follow all those codes. We encourage customers to go to the state contractor Web site.

LBBJ: Because you're running planning, building and redevelopment, you're in a position to steer the direction the city's development is going to go for the next 5, 10 years. You're in a very powerful position to make projects either go forward or stop.

Beck: I'm an individual who works with a team of very talented [people]. I'm lucky enough to be able to manage a group of very talented and committed employees: building inspectors; planning folk who are checking plans and are doing some of the long-range visioning and our Long Beach 2030 [Plan]; our redevelopment team that is working in our redevelopment project areas to address some blighted conditions; we have a planning commission board; we have a redevelopment agency board; we have a cultural heritage commission.

LBBJ: Those are like checks and balances, too?

Beck: I'm an individual who has a great opportunity to work with a great team of people. That team of people has their own responsibilities and there are boards and everything else. Some in this town have called me the "development czar." I've heard that moniker thrown my way. I don't consider myself a development czar. I work with a team: I have the planning commission that I work with; I have a redevelopment agency board that I work with; and I have city council that I work with.

LBBJ: What's it like working with the planning commission? I know there have been some changes.

Beck: The planning commission's a great group of folks.

LBBJ: Does the planning commission challenge the staff.

Beck: Absolutely. You have a group of very talented professionals in this organization. People have their own opinions about what's appropriate and what's not appropriate. [The] same with my planning commissioners. I have architects on the planning commission who have certain perspectives about things, so I do think there is a good working relationship where they challenge staff [by asking], "Why do you believe this? Have you considered this aspect?" I find those dynamics to be wonderful. Then, add the layer of the community on top of that where you have the various PACs that are involved – they have their priorities and we get to work with them.

LBBJ: Are the PACs all represented on the RDA board?

Beck: We have three official PACs – North, Central and West. Under the bylaws, yes, they all have a voice. They have a voice outside of the agency, too. I want to downplay this omnipotent position because it really isn't that. I am lucky enough to work with a group of very talented folks who are committed to this city [and] who do wonderful work every single day. I have commissioners who represent the community. They are community members who sit on these boards. If you look at who's been appointed on these boards, they are a cross section of Long Beach; they do represent a number of interests in this city. That gives not only validity but also another level of dynamics to this process. It makes it better.

LBBJ: Do you think your biggest challenge ahead is money?

Beck: One of the great challenges we have ahead is resources and how we align those resources and ensuring that we continue to provide the level of service that this community deserves and expects.

LBBJ: If money wasn't an issue, is there one project you'd like to tackle?

Beck: I strongly support the mayor's position for infrastructure [improvements] in this city and it's a shame that didn't get approved by the voters. I would like to see Long Beach infrastructure be the best in the west. ■