

RDA: Eliminating Blight, Enhancing Sites

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Construction activity abounds in Downtown Long Beach, where Lyon Realty Advisors is at work on two major residential projects in partnership with the Long Beach Redevelopment Agency (RDA). But the real noise of late is coming from North Long Beach, where residents have voiced concern over the RDA's authority to use eminent domain.

Founded in 1961, the Long Beach RDA comprises seven project areas encompassing roughly 40 percent of the city's total land area: West Beach, Poly High, Downtown, West Long Beach Industrial, Los Altos, North and Central. The agency is funded through tax increment revenues, which are property taxes that remain within the area in which they are generated.

Under California Community Redevelopment Law, a redevelopment agency is allowed to acquire property through eminent domain for 12 years, after which it is required to adopt a redevelopment plan amendment. The RDA's authority to use eminent domain in the North Long Beach Redevelopment Area expired in July 2008, and it therefore requested an amendment that would allow the agency to use eminent domain for another 12 years. The authority would not apply to most of Sub-Area 5, which comprises the Port of Long Beach. The city council approved the amendment during its October 7 meeting.

While written and verbal opposition to the extension included arguments that all residents would be subject to the threat of losing their properties and that property is often purchased below market value, the RDA contends that it is governed by stringent laws dictating what it can and cannot do.

Proposition 99, for instance, was passed in June and prohibits the agency from acquiring single-family homes that have been occupied by the owner for more than one year for the purposes of transferring that property to a private entity. (Public agencies can, however, use eminent domain to acquire single-family, owner-occupied homes for public improvement projects.)

In addition, the RDA must make a reasonable effort to negotiate a voluntary sale with the owner by obtaining appraisals of the property and offering to purchase the property at fair market value. Moreover, the agency must provide relocation benefits to occupants who would be displaced by the sale.

"It's only when those negotiations break down that we resort to using eminent domain as a tool," explains RDA Executive Director Craig Beck, who is also director of Long Beach Development Services (formerly known as the planning and building department), under which the agency is housed. "Eminent domain is a tool to help address public safety in removing blighting influences in many of our areas."

During the last 12 years that eminent domain has been in effect in North Long Beach, the RDA applied it less than a dozen times, Beck says, adding that it was never used to acquire residential property.

"It's an important tool to have, but it needs to be used very judiciously, and one of my goals is to ensure transparency in how we operate," Beck says. "[We] want to make sure the communities are informed about what the agency's doing and how we're moving forward. And to date, any situation we've gone into, [if there have] been objections about moving forward with an acquisition through eminent domain, we've backed away."

As an example, Beck mentions a church on Atlantic Avenue that drew controversy from the community – and a subsequent retreat from the agency.

Property acquisitions are part of the agency's larger goal to eliminate physical and economic blight. In seeking potential development opportunities, the agency then issues requests for proposals for available properties.

"I don't think we should go after homes that are not in the middle of a commercial or retail [corridor]," says Vice Mayor Val Lerch, who represents most of North Long Beach. "On the other hand, if we didn't have eminent domain and the threat of eminent domain, we would have not been able to take out the Morales Motel. We used to call it . . . the 'No-Tell Motel,' and at two o'clock in the after-

noon, there were more Mercedes in front of that place than anything else, and they were there for an hour.

“Without eminent domain, we would have never been able to take out Rocky’s Liquor Store across the street from Jordan High School. That was a tremendous problem for police officers and law enforcement,” he adds. “We wouldn’t have had the ability to do those things, to change our business corridors and to put development in there that makes more sense to the community and the neighborhood.”

Since 2006, the RDA has acquired and demolished more than 25 nuisance properties that accounted for more than 25,000 criminal incidents. In early July, for instance, Jack’s Liquor Store in Downtown Long Beach was demolished. Police reports indicate that the store was the site of 86 violent crimes, 137 narcotics violations and 375 property crimes between 2004 and 2007.

Among other public safety initiatives, the RDA helped fund the use of 17 security cameras along Pine Avenue in Downtown Long Beach that are used as a crime-prevention strategy and a tool for police investigations.

Although contention lingers in North Long Beach, the area is the site of a future sit-down restaurant at Atlantic Avenue and Artesia Boulevard, as well as a promising new development generating excitement among community members and city officials alike. Property acquisitions have steadily occurred in North Long Beach as the city works toward developing the proposed North Village Center, a mixed-use community located on Atlantic Avenue from 56th to 59th streets.

An environmental impact report for the project – which would feature up to 40,000 square feet of neighborhood retail space, a public library and community center facility of up to 30,000 square feet and a maximum of 150 housing units – is expected to be complete in January, followed by entitlement in early spring.

“Not only has the RDA impacted North Long Beach, but it’s actually impacted the entire city in many, many different ways,” Lerch says. “The fact that the RDA has found ways to build about \$90 million of stuff that would have come out of the General Fund . . . has been tremendous.”

Related to its focus on the neighborhood experience are the RDA’s goals regarding public art – an initiative that will soon be seen on The Promenade, where The Olson Company, Lennar Homes and Lyon Realty Advisors contributed \$212,100, \$168,019 and \$234,132, respectively, toward the development of public art. Developers of new projects totaling more than \$250,000 must contribute one percent of their development cost to the Arts Council for Long Beach/RDA public art fund.

“People who invest in art really show that they care about their community. It’s a statement that reflects the

attitude of the community,” Beck says, noting that The Promenade will house a pavilion comprising outdoor space, a stage and aviation-themed art.

In addition, the agency plans to take art into the city’s diverse neighborhoods, identifying 13 sites throughout redevelopment areas that will be home to new public art. “In six to 12 months,” Beck says, “you’ll start seeing a number of pieces popping up throughout our different neighborhoods.”

Artists have so far been identified for the following eight sites:

- Ocean Boulevard medians between the 710 Freeway and Alamitos Avenue: Artist Barbara Grygutis, Barbara Grygutis Sculpture LLC, “Seagrass.”
- Pacific Coast Highway between the 710 Freeway and the western city limits (in the West Industrial Project Area): Artist Terry Braunstein.
- Santa Fe Avenue between Pacific Coast Highway and Hill Street: Artist John Banks.
- Burton Chace Park at Market Street and Dairy Avenue: Artist Rob Neilson, “Playing Chase.”
- Grace Park at Plymouth Street and Elm Avenue: Artist team Alber and Luna De Matteis, “Concert for the Wind.”
- Artesia Boulevard median at the western city limits: Artist John Clement, Firehouse Studios, “Ta Da!”
- Atlantic Avenue medians: Artist team Alber and Luna De Matteis, “Urban Totems.”
- Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard in the Central Project Area: Artist John Clement, Firehouse Studios, “Learning Curves.”

Two Appointed To RDA Board

During its October 7 meeting, the Long Beach City Council approved the appointments of 7th District resident Teer Lee Strickland and 2nd District resident James Thompson III to the redevelopment agency (RDA) board. Strickland, a former Realtor with Keller Williams Realty, has lived in Long Beach for more than a decade. She has more than 20 years of diversified experience, having served in financial and sales management positions in the private, public and nonprofit sectors. Thompson, who has extensive experience with executive business, legal/court affairs and law enforcement, is actively involved with community organizations such as the Alamitos Beach Neighborhood Association, the American Society of Safety Engineers and the Environmental Protection Agency.

The RDA board, which is made up of seven members who are appointed by the mayor and approved by the city council, oversees all redevelopment activity in the city. It meets at 9 a.m. on the first and third Monday of each month at Long Beach City Hall, 333 W. Ocean Blvd. The next meeting is scheduled for October 20. For more information, visit www.longbeachrda.org. ■