

VI. The New Civic Center and Economic Development

Overview

Long Beach is making a significant long-term investment in a new Civic Center. Prompted by seismic deficiencies in the current City Hall building, the City has embarked on a \$500+ million public private partnership that includes a new City Hall and Main Library, a new headquarters for the Port of Long Beach, a redesigned and revitalized Lincoln Park and private development.

Conceptual Drawing: New Long Beach City Hall



While not specifically mentioned as a benefit on the City's web site for the project, elected officials and City staff believe that by creating a vibrant civic center the project will promote substantial private sector investment and accelerate the development of the

Downtown. City staff believes that the additional private development prompted by the project will generate sufficient additional revenue to offset certain cost increases in the project.

Leveraging the new Civic Center for on-going economic development benefits should be a key component of the City's Economic Development Strategy.

Background

The Civic Center project might be considered a "do over". In the 1970s the City embarked on major redevelopment projects designed to revitalize the Downtown. Influenced by the planning and architectural thinking of the time – Brutalism Architecture was in its hay day -- the City created a Civic Center by eliminating the First, Chestnut and Cedar street grid. The resulting mega-block included a new Main Library, City Hall and re-configured Lincoln Park, underground and structured parking, the County Court House and police headquarters.



Got Concrete? (Existing Long Beach City Hall)

The idea behind the Civic Center megablock – of a large and open square serving as the heart of a city – is, of course, not new. Major European cities are defined by their central squares. The

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examples are numerous:¹ Piazza Navona, Campo de Fiori and Piazza San Marco in Italy, Tubingen in Germany, Telcin in the Czech Republic and Rynek Glowny (Krakow) in Poland. There is, however, a major design difference between those squares and Long Beach's Civic Center: famous European town squares tend to be enclosed, creating the "feeling of an outdoor salon or ballroom" and "a sense of community," and "enclose(ing) you like a warm embrace."²

Few have ever felt a warm embrace from the existing Civic Center. Part of the reason is the design: the Long Beach plaza is enclosed by busy thoroughfares, not buildings. A second reason is more operational: over time the Civic Center became less inviting, as little effort was made to activate Lincoln Park or the Civic Center and it became more a gathering place for the homeless than a place for civic engagement.

Accordingly, the Civic Center never met expectations. The combination of Brutalism Architecture, the mega-block concept, design and construction faults and inattention created a Civic Center that became increasingly problematic in the following decades. Each of the components had issues:

- The Main Library seemed (is) fortress-like and unwelcoming. A roof top park above the Main Library was advanced thinking – green before green was fashionable – but waterproofing technologies and implementation issues resulted in a leaking problem not addressed until 2009.
- Lincoln Park never became an asset for the downtown. The amphitheater concept of the original design was not implemented and the park suffered from limited activation. In later years, Lincoln Park became a location for the homeless, further eroding its civic purpose.
- The City Hall building developed numerous issues. Through the years efforts were made to rework the interior to make the building more functional, but many city departments wound up leasing space outside City Hall to accommodate staff. A study in 2006 indicated the City Hall building had significant seismic issues.

The Life (and Death) of Brutalism.

*Brutalism was a popular architectural style from the 1950s through the 1970s. Not surprisingly, architects disagree on exactly what Brutalism is (or was). "Brutalism" does not actually refer to brutality (although some would claim its impact on the senses is at least a first cousin) but originates from the French **béton brut**, which means raw concrete. Concrete – lots of concrete! – is a hallmark of Brutalism.*

Typical projects were massive in character and fortress-like. Brutalism was popular for educational and government buildings – but rare for corporate projects. (Here is a case when the private sector did truly know better.) Many respected institutions (Yale University!) and cities (Boston!) joined Long Beach as fellow travelers in brutalism. Brutalism has long fallen out of favor but its monuments remain, reminders of a period many would like to forget. And recently, the term has been broadly applied to projects or buildings that are massive and/or unpopular; in the vernacular, Just Brutal!

Not only were each of its parts flawed, the Civic Center plaza lacked overall synergy. It developed into a less-than-inviting concrete canyon that failed to leverage its key asset – a prime location on Ocean Boulevard. In sum, the Civic Center became a liability instead of an asset for the City.

¹ "City Squares", Catie Marron, Editor, Harper Collins, May 2016.

² "Genius of the European Square", Livablecities.org, February, 2016.

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The proposed Civic Center as conceived by the Plenary-Edgemoor Civic Partners (PECP) team attempts to address and correct the prior mistakes. It restores the street grid, integrates residential, retail and commercial uses and better leverages the prime location to encourage civic engagement within a more integrated and comfortable urban setting. Undoubtedly, the new Main Library, City Hall and Port headquarters buildings and revitalized Lincoln Park will be more efficient, useful and engaging. The issue is how to fully leverage these substantial infrastructure investments over the long term for maximum economic development benefit.

Economic Impact of Infrastructure

There is no question that well-conceived infrastructure improvements produce significant economic development returns. Public investment in bridges, roads, water and sewer lines, tunnels and air and sea ports has a well documented record of generating economic benefit dating back to the Erie Canal. There is a large body of academic study that supports that conclusion, both on the national and local level.³ At the regional and local level, measurable economic impacts include such metrics as household income, percent of labor force employed and assessed property valuation.

The Long Beach Civic Center project is somewhat different, as the public components of the project – a City Hall, Port headquarters and Main Library – are not projects (roads and bridges, etc.) that are viewed as standard economic development infrastructure. There is little academic examination of the impact of public sector office buildings in creating additional economic benefit as compared to investments in prototypical infrastructure (again, roads and bridges, etc.).

However, the concept of civic centers serving as catalysts for prosperity and civic engagement is a recurring theme for American cities, and helped provided the impetus for construction of the three most recognizable city halls in California: Los Angeles, San Francisco and Pasadena (see Appendix, Impact of City Halls.) And there is substantial evidence that components of the project – particularly the park and library components – can have a long-term positive economic development impact. More than 100 years ago Frederick Law Olmsted – the creator of New York’s famed Central Park – demonstrated the positive connection between parks and property values.⁴ A Main Library that enhances and reinforces the cultural and intellectual fabric of a community can have a significant contribution in attracting and retaining the knowledge workers so important to a 21st century economy: “Regional policy-makers have long sought to attract highly-educated workers with a view to stimulating economic growth and vibrancy.”⁵

Initial Economic Impact of New Civic Center

According to the economic impact study from PECP, the new Civic Center will generate 1,956 direct jobs, 1,907 indirect jobs and 2,203 induced jobs – a total of 6,066 jobs. The new Civic Center is projected to create 3,700 construction jobs. PECP anticipates \$1.4 billion in total economic impact, including:

³ “Infrastructure and Local Economic Development,” Rives and Heaney, *Regional Science Perspectives*, Vol. 25, No.1, 1995.

⁴ “How to Use Parks for Economic Development,” American Planning Association, p. 1.

⁵ “Small Cities and Attracting Knowledge Workers,” Michael R. Betz, Mark D. Partridge and Belal Fallah, *Papers in Regional Science*, March 5, 2015.

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- \$400 million in public construction
- \$260 million in private construction
- \$640 million multiplier effect
- \$93 million resulting from annual operations and events

Long Term Economic Impact of New Civic Center

The initial economic impact of the new Civic Center, both public and private components, will be significant. But it is the vision of both City staff and the development team that the investment will serve as a catalyst for additional Downtown development.

It is clearly to the City's advantage to leverage the Civic Center project to maximize the return on investment. To do so requires more than good design; it requires planning, consensus building and a continuity of effort and resources.

Long Beach has been engaged in revitalizing its downtown for over 40 years. Visitors are consistently impressed with the progress. In the 2000s, new commercial, retail, entertainment and residential developments contributed to the expectations of a vibrant downtown. The new Civic Center could add immeasurably to that revitalization – but it could also be another piece of a downtown puzzle that has not yet quite fulfilled expectations.

Recommendations

What should Long Beach do to ensure maximum economic development success for its \$500+ million investment? The first step is to start planning *now*, before the initial shovel enters the ground. If the new Civic Center is to be transformative, there needs to be a long-term, comprehensive, innovative and realistic plan. These steps will help the project achieve its long-term potential:

- *Involve the entire Long Beach community – not just the downtown.* Long Beach has invested tens of millions in the Downtown but without successfully communicating a clear sense that a vibrant downtown is for *all* of Long Beach. Engaging all of Long Beach would substantially increase the odds for lasting success.
- *Make commercial and cultural communities the leaders of the effort.* A successful effort requires a plan that relies on organic development, not preconceived concepts. Accept that good ideas come from everywhere, not just City Hall.
- *Think long-term.* One-off efforts do not create lasting change. The City is making a long-term investment – up to 50 years – in the new Civic Center. Leveraging that investment for maximum benefit requires long-term thinking and commitment.
- *Ensure the plan has an on-going financing component.* The most important component of any plan is how to finance its implementation, because a plan without secure financing will falter.

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- *Make an effort to tie the pieces of Downtown together.* “Downtown” Long Beach includes many distinct components that are separated by geography and purpose. Pine Avenue, The Pike, Shoreline Village, City Place, the East Village, the Civic Center, the Convention Center, even the Queen Mary – these and other components are all part of Downtown but often seem separate and disconnected. The Downtown is, in effect, a series of villages – some commercial, some retail, some cultural and some residential. Linking those villages in a way that magnifies their impact will go far to making Long Beach a destination city.
- *Empower an entity to oversee the effort.* Because the Civic Center belongs to the entire city, the planning and implementation effort will be most successful if it becomes the task of a single purpose organization that draws on the resources, input and contributions of *all* of Long Beach. Downtown residents and businesses are principal stakeholders, but the Downtown will only fully flourish when it becomes a welcome destination for all of Long Beach – when it becomes for every resident their “second favorite neighborhood.”

Appendix: The New Civic Center and Economic Development

Impact of City Halls



Arguably the three most recognizable city halls in California are in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Pasadena. Although architecturally diverse, they share a common heritage. All three were built in the early part of the 20th Century when civic leaders were influenced by the City Beautiful movement.

The philosophy of the City Beautiful movement was that new and imposing city hall buildings of beauty and grandeur would “create moral and civic virtue and a harmonious social order to better the quality of life.”⁶ (Clearly, planners and architects of that era had lofty ambitions

and expectations.)

The first was San Francisco City Hall, a gorgeous Beaux Arts building, opened in 1915. The structure's dome is the fifth largest in the world; it is taller than the United States Capitol. The Pasadena City Hall opened in 1927. It has elements of the Mediterranean and Spanish Colonial revival styles and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



The Los Angeles City Hall opened in 1928. For decades it was the tallest building in the city – and city ordinances protected that status. It remains an iconic building, famous for its role in numerous movies (Dragnet!). The Los Angeles City Hall – as well as the San Francisco and Pasadena city halls – underwent seismic retrofits in the past decades.

Remarkably, all three buildings have had the kind of cultural and community impact that their designers and proponents envisioned. They have become more than concrete and steel – they have become both symbols and centers of their respective cities.

For decades, the Los Angeles City Hall was an imposing but somewhat isolated landmark. But revitalization of Grand Park – the downtown park in Los Angeles that connects Los Angeles City

⁶ Wilson, William H. (1989). *The City Beautiful Movement*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. pp. 126–146.

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Hall to Grand Avenue and the Music Center, Disney Concert Hall, the Museum of Contemporary Art and the new Broad museum – offers a close-to-home example of leveraging a civic center location into a destination. Creating that destination took decades, complicated by dueling jurisdictions (City of Los Angeles and the County of Los Angeles, two heavyweight players), development delays and misfires and the Great Recession. But the result is impressive. Long Beach can learn from the successes (and errors) made here and in other downtown parks that have played a key revitalization role, such as Millennium Park in Chicago.

Events activate Grand Park (which is actually a County, not City, park) year-round. The County Board of Supervisors provided funding of over \$3 million for the first year's operations, which are coordinated by the Performing Arts Center of LA County.

Yelp and Facebook posts on Grand Park are insightful:

- *Beautiful, modern park in the middle of a metropolitan city! I found out about this place from Wong Fu's "The Last" video and I knew I had to come check this spot out myself. The large water fountain is definitely the centerpiece of the park. You will find people playing and running around in the water fountain. The kids will love it! Come here at night for a romantic evening stroll with your significant other or date after dinner. The water fountain glows in various luminous colors. (Karen T., Anaheim)*
- *"Grand Park is a great venue right in the middle of DTLA that houses hundreds of events every year!" (Jennifer T., Alhambra, CA)*
- *"After reading the reviews from fellow Yelpers, Norm, Alana, Joseph, Kat, and Yuri, I was inspired to pen my own observations of Grand Park, 'The Park for Everyone!'" (Nadine C., Kaneohe, HI)*
- *"This park houses some very nice cultural celebrations and is one of the greatest things to happen to downtown aside from the bar's, trendy people, and Staples Center. I can't wait to see what the spring & summer line up is gonna look like! Love it, thank you Grand Park!" (Keesha F., Los Angeles)*

