

“Absent a compelling vision, an inspiring vision, development will not reach its full potential.”

CITYSCAPE Cliff Ratkovich

■ By **BRANDON RICHARDSON**, Senior Writer

With more than 50 development projects in the planning phase, under construction or nearing completion citywide, the Long Beach cityscape is beginning to transform. These changes will be most prominent when viewing the downtown skyline, according to Cliff Ratkovich, president of Ratkovich Properties.

“I don’t know of any city in America that has more construction activity, more development on the horizon than Downtown Long Beach,” Ratkovich said. “Like most cities, the downtown is an important part of the city. It’s really the heart of the city, if you will. If the heart isn’t functioning, then the other parts of the city don’t function well.”

Ratkovich contrasted this activity and growth to the ’80s, when Long Beach was ranked as the fifth most blighted city in America. The downtown area was on life support with many parcels vacant or in extreme decay. Today, with parcels being filled in, Ratkovich explained that communities are becoming more connected.

Integral to this connectivity is Ratkovich Properties’ Broadway Block, which is planned at the former Acres of Books site along Long Beach Boulevard between Broadway and 3rd Street. The project consists of one 22-story and one seven-story building, which feature 392 residential units, and 30,000 square feet of restaurant, retail, art gallery and Cal State Long Beach creative space. Ratkovich said he hopes to have city approval by the end of the year and begin construction in 2018.

“What it affords us is the opportunity to do something that is much more than just developing a project or developing a building. There is a rare opportunity to really build community and to create a strong sense of place,” Ratkovich said. “We have carefully designed the project in such a way that . . . we will give it a sense of community that is rare to find in any other development downtown.”

Once completed, Ratkovich said Broadway Block would connect the downtown core with the adjacent East Village Arts District. This idea of viewing a develop-

ment as a truly integrated part of the community in terms of connecting areas of the city will become more commonplace, according to Ratkovich. He said this is the most sustainable and authentic way to create a positive atmosphere downtown that would then radiate out to the rest of the city.

As the downtown matures and parcels become scarce, Ratkovich said the only course of action is to build up. With the Broadway Block’s 22-story high-rise and the forthcoming 35-story second phase of The Current on the corner of Ocean Boulevard and Alamitos Avenue, Ratkovich said this process has already begun. However, he explained that the bar needs to be raised in terms of architectural standards.

“Long Beach, frankly, has a history of getting to the edge of greatness and figuring out a way to compromise and settle for mediocrity,” Ratkovich said. “What I think is most important is that the bar be raised higher and higher as far as design standards in terms of bringing a type of architecture and the types of buildings downtown that Long Beach truly deserves.”

As the downtown reaches a plateau in development, Ratkovich said there will be a ripple effect that causes rejuvenation throughout the city. He explained that as downtown rents increase, people unable or unwilling to pay those rates will likely move to fringe neighborhoods just outside of downtown. This shift would then cause development to expand to these fringe communities.

As improvements ripple through the city, Ratkovich stressed the importance of remaining sensitive to existing neighborhoods and residents. He said pure gentrification that turns a neighborhood into something it is not should not be the goal. A vibrant downtown would help each unique neighborhood aspire to become healthy and vibrant in its own way.

“Development doesn’t occur in a vacuum. It takes strong vision, and it takes strong leadership on multiple levels. Absent a compelling vision, an inspiring vision, development will not reach its full potential. I’m very optimistic about the future of downtown,” Ratkovich said. “There’s no scenario that I can envision – other than one that is more macro in its character – that can derail Long Beach from having a very bright future, both in the short term as well as the long term.”