

As Published in the Los Angeles Daily Journal:
Shuttered CRAs Open Door for New Development Sources
-Shiraz D. Tangri

The year started with a bang for City Hall, thanks to the California Supreme Court's decision terminating redevelopment at the end of this month.

On December 29, the court decided that the Legislature acted within its authority in passing legislation dissolving all California redevelopment agencies in jurisdictions that committed to divert redevelopment funding to be used for education and public safety. The high court's decision terminates all redevelopment agencies as of January 31, and requires all cities and counties to begin immediately the process of winding down the agencies. Although the court's ruling applies statewide, its ramifications loom large for the city of Los Angeles. The Community Redevelopment Agency of Los Angeles was the largest in the state, with close to 200 employees who now face unemployment. The agency wields significant land-use and planning powers in the many redevelopment project areas created to address urban blight all across the city. CRA's impact was not only a function of its geographic scope—for decades; the agency has served as the city's primary economic development and affordable housing departments.

Given the scope and authority enjoyed by the CRA, some argue that the agency has shaped modern Los Angeles to a greater degree than any other government entity since World War II. While that is a double-edged observation, I am not looking to kick the agency while it is down and nearly out. CRA's many achievements deserve acknowledgement, including the roles it played in the renaissance of Hollywood and downtown since the turn of the century.

The half-million people who work downtown and the millions more who come each year to visit the Staples Center and the cultural institutions on Grand Avenue, or shop at the Hollywood & Highland Center all benefit from those efforts. CRA deserves credit for the part it played in bringing to fruition each of those now-iconic places in Los Angeles, as do the talented and committed employees that helped drive the agency forward.

Given CRA's many tentacles, it will take some months to deal with the full consequences of its impending dissolution. Developers, elected officials and government staffers can expect a turbulent period of sorting through the myriad open issues, ranging from employee contracts to pending permit approvals. Important as each of these short-term issues are, the most compelling question is the big picture one: How will Los Angeles tackle urban revitalization in the future?

In an era where public and private resources are thin on the ground, it may seem like the wrong moment to consider creating and funding an agency to focus on redevelopment. But, while opportunity appeared more like a wrecking ball than a polite knock, it is nonetheless at our door.

CRA's elimination comes at a moment when many agencies within the city are re-evaluating their respective involvement in the development process. The departments of City Planning and Building and Safety unveiled major reforms last year to improve interagency cooperation, reduce bureaucracy and eliminate the redundancies that have long plagued anyone trying to build in Los Angeles. The state, inspired by a proposed downtown football stadium, has made inroads to tackling the abuse of the California Environmental Quality Act to unduly delay development projects. Even the Department of Transportation is getting into the act by looking to update its analytical methods to encourage the use of

transit and other alternatives to ever-increasing traffic congestion. The elimination of redevelopment underscores the growing impetus to create modern tools to guide the city's future growth.

To this point, during a recent City Council discussion on CRA dissolution, Councilwoman Jan Perry asked the city to report back on the creation of a downtown-specific development entity. Despite the progress of the last decade, downtown remains a challenging place to do business. While blessed with density, transit and employment, many areas there struggle with chronic homelessness and other urban blight. Creation of an agency that focuses its expertise and resources on downtown's unique assets and issues will pay returns for the entire region, as the area is the primary transportation hub and employment center for Southern California.

Further, the new agency should focus its efforts on infrastructure and public projects that attract new investment by the private sector, like streetscapes and parks. Two such ventures currently in the visioning phase are the downtown streetcar project and Park 101, a proposed cap park over the Hollywood (101) Freeway through downtown. Though complicated and challenging, these visionary projects would be catalytic in helping Los Angeles redefine itself as a sustainable city, rather than a land of congested freeways. In the absence of the CRA, the city will need new leadership to move these aspirational projects forward.