

Long Beach Council Approves Sale of ArtExchange, Acres of Books Site

By Andrew Edwards, Press-Telegram

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The future owners of the downtown Long Beach lot that is home to ArtExchange Visual Art Center and the former Acres of Books site view the space as an opportunity to link the city's business district to its artsy East Village neighborhood.

"This is not a site where we intend to do anything we would consider 'middle of the road' or ordinary," said Cliff Ratkovich, president of Ratkovich Properties, LLC. It's going to be important to us that whatever is designed there speaks to the creativity and artistic vibe in that district."

Ratkovich Properties has offices in Long Beach and Irvine. The development firm is now poised to acquire land near the crossing of Third Street and Long Beach Boulevard from city government. The City Council voted unanimously Tuesday night to sell the real estate for roughly \$2.3 million as part of City Hall's plan to sell off former redevelopment agency properties. The council's vote followed the Planning Commission's decision made in August to approve plans from another developer, City Ventures, to build a 40-unit condo project at the nearby intersection of Third and Broadway.

"Residents of Long Beach will soon have a vibrant city block," Councilwoman Suja Lowenthal said before the vote.

Ratkovich Properties plans to build a mid-rise structure north of the vacant Acres of Books store with commercial space on its ground floor and apartments above, according to a staff report provided to the council. The firm also plans to sell the former Acres of Books building to Long Beach-based Urbana Development, representatives of both companies confirmed.

Ratkovich and Urbana Development principal Richard Lewis said their respective firms are still working on plans for the property.

"If you plot all of this out, we're probably a year at the earliest from being able to commence construction," Ratkovich said.

After construction begins, another 15 to 18 months may pass before Ratkovich's building is ready to go to market.

Ratkovich Properties is also the co-developer of The Edison, a downtown Long Beach project involving the conversion of the former City Hall East offices into a 12-story residential tower with nearly 160 residential units. The Edison will be ready to go to market in a matter of weeks, Ratkovich said.

As for Urbana Development, Lewis said his company has eyed the Acres of Books site for several years and is now considering options to convert the former book store into something new.

“We look forward to showing you the plan as this develops,” Lewis said.

The city’s staff report also noted Ratkovich Properties plans to convey the ArtExchange building to its current tenants. The company’s president said details of the planned transfer have yet to be finalized.

City officials pursued the sale as part of their efforts to find new buyers for nearly 30 properties formerly owned by the city’s now defunct redevelopment agency. In March, state officials approved Long Beach’s plan to sell the land as a means to draw new business to the city.

Green actions

Long Beach’s council also voted Tuesday to grant Mayor Robert Garcia’s request to look for opportunities to improve the accessibility of electric vehicle charging stations in the city and to enhance bicycle access on a few city streets ranging from North Long Beach to Bixby Knolls.

Tuesday’s vote assigns the Sustainable City Commission, an advisory body, to produce a report in 120 days.

The council also approved a contract with a maximum of roughly \$1.2 million with Brea’s Sully-Miller Contracting Co. for bike lanes and other street improvements.

Among the areas where improvements are planned:

- Part of Harding Street near the Los Angeles River in north Long Beach
- Del Amo Boulevard between Orange and Cherry avenues
- San Antonio Drive between Del Amo Boulevard and Del Mar Avenue in Bixby Knolls
- Pacific Avenue from Spring Street to Ocean Boulevard

The contract also calls for the construction of two new traffic signals and a pair of traffic circles in the project area.

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