

ULI – Places of Commerce Initiative Council Meeting – November 1, 2012

Topic: “Scales of Commerce – Transformation of El Toro Road” Featured Speaker: David Belmer, Assistant City Manager, City of Lake Forest

The City of Lake Forest managed to create a “sense of place” along El Toro Road, with a little bit of luck and smart planning. Assistant City Manager David Belmer, provided the ULI Places of Commerce Initiative Council with an over view about how the City Council, City departments, private stakeholders, and community residents all worked on the idea of designing a corridor that will invite activity into the City and also created an authentic sense of place.

El Toro Road began as a major commercial corridor in the Saddleback Valley in the 1960s-70s. The land was originally owned by families that allowed long-term ground leases. As a result of long-term ownership by investors and market shifts in the 1970s-80s, property values and conditions began to decline. In 1988, the City stepped in and formed the El Toro Project Area to protect from further decline. Ten years later, Lake Forest gained control of the Project Area after negotiating the transfer of land rights from the County of Orange. During the decade of negotiation, Lake Forest activated the Redevelopment Agency in 1995, and began to promote community outreach programs. In 1998, the community-outreach efforts lead to the creation of the Revitalization and Revisioning Strategy. The goal was to create a “vibrant, thriving, successful commercial district and social center point of the community.”

The transformation of El Toro Road would not have been possible without the combined major investment from the City and private investors. The City invested heavily in public facilities and provided the necessary infrastructure while private developers invested heavily in private property improvements. The minimal remaining funds were provided by Bonds, Measure M, and grant awards. In addition to numerous funding resources, the City collaborated closely with West Trust. West Trust specialized in working with distressed properties and was highly recognized for their ability to negotiate property sales based on the value of potential future development that was realistic. The City of Lake Forest and West Trust quickly formed a strong working relationship to plan the redevelopment of El Toro Road, together.

David Belmer emphasized throughout the discussion how the Design Guidelines that were implemented in 2000, requiring a unified architectural theme (Craftsmen) along the corridor, contributed to creating a sense of place and not another big-box strip mall. One of the most significant decisions the City Council supported was to use eminent domain to eliminate three gas stations at the primary gateway of the corridor and create The Arbor. The Arbor is a beautifully landscaped and designed gateway into the City. Although the City Council faced severe pressure from community residents when they proposed eliminating the gas stations, the Council members firmly believed that The Arbor would prove to be a catalyst for change in the community. And, it certainly has.

The success of the El Toro Road transformation weighs heavily on the “buy-in” from top to bottom. Since the 1990s, the City Council, City staff, private stakeholders, and community residents have all been strong believers and fully committed to the decisions that were being made. West Trust embraced the strong community participation and supported the vision created by the community. The City set clear and high expectations through the use of Design Guidelines, while maintaining a business-

friendly relationship with developers. Belmer summed up the success of the El Toro Road transformation in two words: "Planning matters!"

Present at the meeting:

David Belmer – Assistant City Manager, City of Lake Forest

Phyllis Alzamora – Urban Land Institute

Jeff Odgen – Lend Lease

Elizabeth Cobb – Shea Properties

Mike Reynolds – The Concord Group

Robert Glessner

Andrew Watkins – SWA Group

Matt Fogt – Allen Matkins

Bryce Bunker – Student Rep, UCI MURP