Against the backdrop of the nation’s worst recession since the Great Depression, the Lancaster Redevelopment Agency launched one of its most massive redevelopment projects to date: The BLVD Transformation Project. The Agency’s formidable goal was to redevelop and revitalize the downtown area, which had served as the thriving commercial and social center of the entire Antelope Valley region in decades past. Like many downtowns, what was once a vibrant city center had degenerated into a dilapidated area which served as a magnet for increasing blight and crime. A local unemployment rate of over 18%, twice the national average, exacerbated the problem and made redevelopment of the area an even greater necessity.

Under the leadership of the Agency’s directors, the Agency developed a strategic vision for the future of our downtown: it would become the epicenter for the arts, dining, shopping, entertainment and culture for all of northern Los Angeles County. Lancaster’s Downtown Specific Plan, approved in late 2008, provided the blueprints to build this dream into reality.

The Agency wasted no time in implementing this plan, partnering with the downtown merchant association and private developers to attract the appropriate tenant mix to support the vision for downtown Lancaster. Revitalization efforts encompassed a complete streetscape redesign; nine new housing complexes; rehabilitation/ construction of more than 110,000 square feet of commercial space; and construction of two major public facilities – a park and a museum.

Newly re-branded as “The BLVD,” downtown Lancaster is already an integral asset to the region and is fast becoming known as the destination for special events and social gatherings alike. The BLVD has not only been restored to its former glory as the heart of our community; it has been transformed into a thriving cultural scene that is more vibrant than ever before. The Agency’s $41 million investment has already yielded over $273 million in economic output, 37 new businesses, and over 1,900 jobs. The area has not only gained economic strength; with regular events such as farmer’s markets, concerts, and holiday celebrations, it has metamorphosed into the heartbeat of our city, a central hub of activity and community. Its success is the triumph of a locally unprecedented partnership among the Agency, downtown businesses, private developers, and downtown organizations.

Laying the Foundation

While public-private partnerships have been the cornerstone of The BLVD Transformation Project, one major public project laid the groundwork for the overall revitalization. In March 2010, the Agency broke ground on an $11.6 million construction project to completely demolish, redesign and reconstruct the nine-block stretch of what is now known as “The BLVD” in the heart of downtown Lancaster. This included a complete overhaul of the streetscape, including new colored pavers and sidewalks; the addition of a significant number of trees; street furniture and lighting; branded signage; and landscape and irrigation systems. The same improvements were then extended along Elm/Ehrlich and Fig Avenues, two key side streets near the center of The BLVD.

The construction area encompassed 180 businesses, all of which remained open throughout the construction period. Understandably, these businesses expressed great concern over the potential impact of limited access to their storefronts in the midst of an already tough economy. To combat this problem, construction was divided into three phases, ensuring that each group of businesses was affected for three months or less. The project broke ground after the 2009 holiday season and was completed before the 2010 holiday season to further minimize the impact. Agency staff also remained on the job site and maintained constant communication with the businesses to ensure that they were apprised of construction progress. In addition, the Agency worked with the merchant association to establish Block Captains, a merchant on each block who was responsible for disseminating information to his/her neighbors on short notice.

1 California Redevelopment Association IMPLAN Job Calculator. Supported by reports of job counts from downtown developers.
The BLVD Transformation Project

In November 2010, just eight months after breaking ground, the Agency joined with the community and area stakeholders to celebrate the grand opening of the new BLVD. The resulting layout of the downtown emphasizes livability and walkability. The innovative form-based code used in the Specific Plan unites pedestrians with their surroundings by building to the property line. Traffic calming measures, including center-of-street parking, narrower lanes and increased trees and landscaping, make The BLVD pedestrian-friendly. A variety of amenities are close at hand for residents and workers in the downtown area, including dining; retail; professional services; and entertainment. All of these aspects of the downtown design contribute to the realization of the plan for the Central Business District Project Area.

In addition to the streetscape, the Agency acquired and assembled sites for two major public projects to support downtown revitalization. American Heroes Park, a 13.5-acre, $7 million facility complete with athletic fields, basketball courts and an amphitheater, opened in summer 2011. Also, a new facility for the Lancaster Museum of Art and History will provide 19,250 square feet of space for exhibitions and cultural activities. This marks a 140% increase over the existing facility’s size, thus raising the caliber of the museum by enabling it to host traveling exhibitions such as those featured in major metropolitan areas. The facility, which also features a rooftop terrace to serve as event space, is slated to open in fall 2011.

Encouraging Entrepreneurship

Throughout the revitalization process, Agency staff has aggressively sought to attract businesses that would enhance the downtown tenant mix. As described in the Implementation Plan, this includes restaurants, boutique retail establishments, and the expansion of small business concerns. In less than two years, The BLVD has attracted 37 new businesses in this target tenant mix, despite the economic difficulty of opening a business in today’s market. This exponential expansion in use types has served to attract a wide spectrum of demographics to the new BLVD.

The project’s impact has also had a substantial impact on revenue, accomplishing another goal laid out in the implementation and project area plans. During the most recent year for which data is available (quarter 2 of 2010 through quarter 1 of 2011), revenue has increased 44% compared to the same period in the year prior to the adoption of the Specific Plan – and the 2010 figures include the streetscape construction period, which limited access to businesses.

The BLVD’s centerpiece commercial project is the massive BeX complex, a former blighted furniture store which has been transformed into a trendy bar and grill with a neighboring nightclub. Beneath these is an upscale underground bowling alley stylized to resemble the London Underground. Such additions have played an integral role in changing the community’s mindset regarding The BLVD by making it a nighttime hotspot in addition to a daytime destination, thus appealing to a much broader range of residents.

The Agency has partnered with the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) to help ensure the long-term sustainability of The BLVD. Through this partnership, SBDC and Agency staff organize and implement training events designed to benefit downtown businesses. One such example is the BLVD Business Boot Camp, which brought entrepreneurial experts to instruct BLVD businesses in a variety of aspects of business management. In addition, the Agency is working with the merchant association to expand the current Business Improvement District (BID) into a property-based business improvement district, thus providing a more substantial source of long-term funds for efforts such as joint marketing endeavors, maintenance, and more.

To continue this positive momentum, Agency directors enacted a façade improvement program in March 2011, allotting $430,000 to incentivize new businesses in the target tenant mix to locate downtown and give existing businesses an opportunity to upgrade their facades. The program has already attracted seven new businesses and will support upgrades for three existing ones, as well as generating private investment through matching contributions.

2 City of Lancaster tax revenue records.
The BLVD Transformation Project

Attractive and Affordable Living

The construction and rehabilitation of various types of housing has been another key component of downtown revitalization. This began with the North Downtown Transit Village (NDTV) Project, an element of the overall BLVD Transformation effort. To achieve the vision for downtown as the cultural and commercial center of the Antelope Valley region, planners knew that the long-term viability of The BLVD depended on the elimination of residential blight and an increased number of residents to support commercial activity. Coupled with the Downtown Specific Plan, the NDTV has accomplished these goals, which are also laid out in the project area and implementation plans.

The Agency has engaged in a number of projects to increase density as prescribed in the NDTV and Downtown Specific Plans. Since 2005, nine housing complexes consisting of nearly 800 units have been completed in the downtown area. Several of these provide housing for low to moderate-income workforce families. Three are exclusively for low-income seniors and disabled adults, including what is perhaps one of downtown Lancaster’s greatest redevelopment stories: Arbor Court.

Arbor Court was once known as the Essex House, a centrally located hotel and event space that played host to a wide variety of functions until it closed its doors in the mid-2000s. The Agency assisted in the purchase and rehabilitation of the property, which is now the site of 233 units of rehabilitated senior and disabled apartments. The complex operates on the philosophy that “Seniors and disabled adults deserve to age in place with dignity regardless of income.” Accordingly, each studio apartment is fully furnished with such modern amenities as a touchscreen computer and a lifeline system. Residents are encouraged to actively participate in community life through a variety of activities, from art classes to activities in a state-of-the-art computer lab. Adult day health care and a full meal plan are also available on-site. This project eliminated a substantial source of blight in the form of a underutilized former hotel, while also providing much-needed affordable housing for our community’s senior population.

Another unique housing complex is the Arbor Artists’ Lofts, which consists of 21 units of new construction lofts above 2,000 square feet of gallery space. Designed exclusively for artists, this complex received an AIA/HUD Award in 2010 for its innovative architecture.

Making Services More Accessible

In addition to more traditional housing and commercial projects, the Agency has taken advantage of opportunities to serve the community by partnering with local nonprofit organizations to establish new services in the downtown area. One such partnership is with the Mental Health Association (MHA), which provides mental health programs for adults and homeless individuals with mental illness. The Agency purchased and demolished a number of blighted commercial properties along Sierra Highway, a key corridor just north of The BLVD. The Agency then worked with a private developer to construct Arbor Fields, a housing complex with 100 new units of affordable housing as well as space to house MHA operations. Services offered include mental health care, job training, substance abuse recovery, and more.

The Children’s Center of the Antelope Valley provides another prime example of a successful partnership between the Agency and a local nonprofit. The Center provides a variety of services to child victims of abuse, children at risk of abuse, and their families. The Agency acquired and cleared the site, then assisted in construction of a facility to house the organization and its services.

Growing a Community

Even before the launch of the revitalization project, downtown was envisioned as a major hub for arts and culture. With this in mind, the Lancaster Performing Arts Center was constructed in the early 1990s. This nearly 800-seat facility provides the ideal venue to bring first-rate concerts, plays and other live performances to local residents.
In this vein, the Specific Plan laid out ways to solidify The BLVD’s reputation as the cultural epicenter of the Antelope Valley. The Agency has participated in efforts to accomplish this goal through construction of the new museum facility. In addition, the Agency partnered with a private developer to facilitate construction of Laemmle BLVD Cinemas, a three-story commercial complex which houses a three-screen independent movie theater and retail store.

The art gallery in the Artists’ Lofts builds on this theme, providing 2,000 square feet of gallery space for resident artists to display their works. The City has also launched two innovative art-related programs on The BLVD. These include “Random Acts of Music,” which provides several outdoor pianos on which pedestrians can play, and “Antelopes on Parade,” through which local artists decorate antelope statues which are then located in unexpected places throughout the downtown area.

To build on the social scene created by these many cultural opportunities, the Agency has provided financial and organizational support to implement a number of new special events to attract people downtown. The year-round Celebrate Downtown Lancaster Series encompasses four major special events ranging from a USO-style patriotic celebration to professional go-kart races on the streets of downtown at up to 100 mph. These events brought more than 110,000 people to The BLVD in 2010, and a weekly farmers’ market has attracted thousands more. This unique blend of events has helped build a stronger sense of community by bringing area residents from all walks of life together to celebrate and enjoy our downtown on a regular basis.

Start to Finish

One of the most unique aspects of The BLVD Transformation Project is that, in the middle of a major recession, a relatively small city in the high desert was able to take a Downtown Specific Plan and make it a reality in the space of just a couple of years. Such speedy and thorough implementation could not have been accomplished without the ongoing support and dedication of the downtown merchant association and the community at large.

The Agency worked to achieve this buy-in by working directly with the community from the project’s start. Prior to beginning the Specific Plan, community input was sought through workshops, charrette processes, children’s visioning activities, and downtown walks. Agency staff conducted extensive outreach to gather input from several community organizations, including the merchant association and the Chamber of Commerce, and from the community at large through special events and public meetings. Thus, the Specific Plan reflected the needs and wishes of the community, as does the downtown that has been constructed based on it.

Overall, the Agency’s $41 million investment has yielded an estimated $273.3 million in economic output. The BLVD Transformation Project has generated over $13.2 million in state and local revenues and an estimated 1,900 jobs. There were no special legal circumstances that affected this project, nor was it a brownfield project.

In late 2008, the Agency officially launched its mission to revitalize the downtown area with the approval of the Downtown Specific Plan. Now, just two and a half years later, the Agency has accomplished its goal of transforming the downtown into a major regional destination for shopping, dining, entertainment and the arts, and The BLVD is well on its way to achieving the still loftier goal of becoming the cultural capital of northern Los Angeles County. More importantly, the Agency has changed the way people think about Lancaster. Lifelong residents and first-time visitors alike now see a thriving commercial and social center where once there was a decrepit, blighted and crime-ridden business district. And finally, the Agency has resurrected the very heart of the community at a time when area residents needed it most. Reviving downtown into a vibrant urban core has been akin to giving an ailing patient a heart transplant: the economic and social success is beginning to radiate outwards from the center of the community, helping to revitalize other areas and inspiring new hope in a city severely affected by the recession. The BLVD truly is everything those involved had hoped it would be: a place where friends meet, businesses thrive, and the community comes together as one.

3 California Redevelopment Association IMPLAN Job Calculator.
General Agency Profile

The Lancaster Redevelopment Agency is divided into two departments: Economic Development, which consists of four full-time staff members, and Housing and Neighborhood Revitalization, comprised of 14 full-time staff. Established in 1979, the Agency’s annual tax increment is $66,205,039 and the housing set-aside is $13,241,008. After pass-through payments, the Agency receives $6,620,504, not including the housing set-aside.

<table>
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<th>The BLVD Transformation Project</th>
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<td>Jobs Created</td>
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<td>State/Local Revenues</td>
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Attractive and Affordable Living

- Arbor Gardens: 76 new construction and 40 rehab senior apartments
- Arbor Grove: Mixed use, 150 senior apartments with retail on ground level
- Arbor Fields: Mixed use, 100 workforce housing units plus Mental Health Association offices
- Laurel Crest: 72 units new construction workforce housing units
- Arbor Court: 234 units of rehab senior and disabled apartments
- Arbor Lofts: 21 units new construction artists’ lofts over 2,000 square feet of gallery space
- Arbor on Date: 40 units new construction workforce housing
- Sagebrush I: 21 units new construction affordable townhomes
- Sagebrush II: 40 units new construction workforce housing
- Infill Housing Program: rehab or reconstruction of 13 single-family homes

Leveraging Private Participation

Little Szechwan *(Chinese restaurant)*
Me Gusta Mexican Food Specialties
Giannini Bistro and Grill
BeX Bar & Grill
RoShamBo Lounge
Underground Bowling Lounge
Rae’s Cup+Cake Bakeshop
Simply Spoiled *(children’s boutique)*
Bandstand Coffee & Tea
Xogurt Frozen Yogurt
Five & Dime Candy Store
Antiques on The BLVD
Kiki’s *(women’s accessories)*
BLVD Antiques
Lamplighter Candles
The BLVD Today Café *(wireless internet sidewalk café)*
In Perfect Balance
AV Dance Studio ‘81
Backdrop *(home décor store)*
Bella Bridal
Fusion Hair Studio
Artist Lofts Gallery
MGS Custom Bikes
Academy of Style
Chimera *(tattoo shop)*
Vintage Styles Now *(vintage clothing)*
Pinke’s Place *(antique shop)*
Nothing but Bling *(clothing and accessories)*
Happy Tails *(pet grooming)*
Laemmle BLVD Cinemas
Forge *(eclectic retail store)*
Expression Boutique
Molly Kates Gift Boutique & Tea Room
Pour d’Vino
Kinetic Microbrewery
Juice Box
MGS on the BLVD *(retail clothing and accessories)*
TESTIMONIALS

Encouraging Entrepreneurship:

“It’s wonderful to see all these businesses flocking to The BLVD. Our City has been named the ‘most business-friendly in L.A. County’ and we want to always keep it that way.”

– Lancaster Mayor R. Rex Parris

“We’ve been here in Lancaster for five and a half years, and our recent move to this end of The BLVD has been great. Lancaster is a friendly place to do business and the City has been great to work with.”

– Erica Allbee, co-owner of All About Fitness

“We are so excited to bring wine education and appreciation to Lancaster. Pour d’ Vino will offer its clientele an elegant yet comfortable social setting to enjoy The BLVD, wine and good company. The City of Lancaster has done an incredible job of making Downtown a social destination, and we are proud to be a part of it.”

– Jody Cherbonneaux, co-owner of Pour d’Vino

“We love the visibility of our new location, and are thrilled to be a part of everything going on here.”

– Mike Stafford, co-owner of MGS Custom Bikes & MGS on the BLVD

“The goals of the City of Lancaster are the same as those of the BLVD businesses. We are creating an image of Lancaster as a destination with its own character while creating new jobs and increasing tax revenues.”

– Myrle McLernon, partner in Kinetic Brewing Co. and president of The BLVD Association

“The new BLVD deputies are a good thing. They have been coming in and building partnerships with the businesses, making business owners and our staff feel safe and comfortable, which allows us to focus on providing the best service to our customers.”

– Maria Elena Grado, owner of The Lemon Leaf Café

“It is so exciting to actually see all the pieces starting to come together. To go from blueprint to footprint in just a matter of months has been simply amazing.”

– Valerie Orcutt, owner of Bella West Salon & Spa

Converging on The BLVD:

“We’ve definitely seen an increase in business here during the Farmers Market. The word from customers is that they love it. Everyone appreciates that the Farmers Market has come to The BLVD.”

– Sharon Giannini, co-owner Giannini Bistro & Grill

“It’s definitely a plus to be able to expose our business at the Farmers Market. It’s fantastic! I think it’s the best way to promote your business – person to person. I’ve waited a long time for the Farmers Market and I’m thrilled it’s finally happening.”

– Guido Gil, owner of Me Gusta Mexican Food

“We are very pleased to be in a partnership with the City of Lancaster. The inaugural season of the Sierra Toyota Concert Series promises to bring great entertainment downtown. This is an exciting opportunity to promote Sierra Toyota as a premier auto sales facility in the Antelope Valley and to meet our customers in a relaxed and festive environment.”

– Paul Ondo, General Manager, Sierra Toyota Scion of Lancaster

“American Heroes Park is a vital element of our downtown revitalization efforts. This facility will be a tremendous addition to our City’s core, making downtown an ever more appealing destination. It will also provide yet another venue in which our residents can gather and engage in positive activities as a community.”

– Lancaster Mayor R. Rex Parris
The BLVD Transformation Project

“We were happy to assist the City of Lancaster and their event staff last year, but I quickly found myself realizing how big this race could become for the city and the sport of karting as a whole. You can be sure that we will be using what we’ve learned from our national races to take the Streets of Lancaster Grand Prix to the next level.”

– Tom Kutscher, Superkarts! USA President

“Lancaster West Rotary is excited to take advantage of this unique opportunity to support our City and local families to help make the Streets of Lancaster Grand Prix a signature event.”

– Gus Camacho, Lancaster West Rotary President and owner of Camacho Auto Sales

Attracting Artists:

“We have worked hand-in-hand with the City to create a unique vision for this area to develop downtown Lancaster as an Urban Center with an incredible mix of uses to draw everyone into its core.”

– Scott Ehrlich, partner InSite Development

“Multiple uses of the outdoor gallery and storefront spaces provide many opportunities for the community to participate in this project. Also, in terms of height of ceilings and other proportions, the different scales of the project make it quite unique and attractive.”

– The American Institute of Architects (AIA) award jury

“These pianos are a catalyst for creating community. When someone sits down and starts to play, people stop, gather around, and begin to comment and converse. These pianos, like many other attractions on the BLVD, provide a focal point where people can come together and connect with one another.”

– Lancaster Mayor R. Rex Parris

Success Breeds Success:

“We truly didn’t expect such a significant number of top-quality presentations and ideas. The other investors and I were absolutely blown away by what these entrepreneurs had to offer. There are a few people and a few ideas that we are hoping to pursue.”

– Scott Ehrlich of InSite Development, who initially conceived of the Winning Pitch program as an innovative way to fill some of the remaining commercial vacancies on The BLVD

“These experienced professionals know what it takes for a business to succeed. This event has incredible potential to benefit the bottom lines of all those who participate. I strongly encourage not just BLVD businesses, but all local businesses to take advantage of this excellent opportunity.”

– Myrle McLernon, president of The BLVD Association speaking of The BLVD Business Boot Camp

“These new businesses will add to the atmosphere down The BLVD by offering the opportunity to come down, take a stroll and enjoy a coffee while reading the paper, or come by after a soccer game to have some frozen yogurt and enjoy the weather while sitting in our outdoor patio.”

– Rick Gutierrez, The Bandstand Coffee & Tea and Xogurt Frozen Yogurt

“As stakeholders in this area, we took a chance, knowing an inspiration would come to light. We had no idea this great project would turn out to be a restaurant. But the light turned on, and we had a brainchild named BeX. We’re no longer only in the business of real estate development; we’re in the business of building dreams and building futures.”

– Steve Eglish, BeX Bar & Grill