

Striving to be the best

Cerritos and Downey are finalists for most business-friendly city in L.A. County

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Metré Anthony is one of the reasons Cerritos has a reputation of being a business-friendly city. The redevelopment and economic development coordinator also serves as an ombudsman working with new businesses to ensure that they and city are on the same page. (Steven Georges, Staff Photographer)

If you're a business owner looking to set up shop, the cities of Downey and Cerritos look like a great bet.

The two area cities are among 11 finalists for the 2010 Most Business-Friendly City award presented by the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp. Winners will be announced Nov. 10 at the group's annual Eddy Awards, which were created in 2006 and recognize cities in the county promoting business-friendly programs and services.

Finalists were selected by the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation based on several criteria:

- Demonstrated commitment to economic development as a priority;
- Excellence in programs and services designed to facilitate business entry, expansion and retention;
- Economic development activity over the past three years;
- Competitive business tax rates and fee structures;
- Availability of economic incentives;
- And effective communication with and about business clients.

Also nominated this year were Alhambra, Carson, Torrance, West Covina and Whittier in the category of cities with populations of 60,000 or more. Azusa, Commerce, Duarte and La Mirada are nominated for cities with populations less than 60,000.

Last year Long Beach won the coveted title in the category of 60,000 or more, beating Alhambra, Downey, Lakewood, Torrance and Whittier.

Up for its third nomination, Cerritos has long

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touted its business-friendly atmosphere with its recently expanded Los Cerritos Center mall and lucrative Cerritos Auto Square.

And what make Cerritos so business-



Porto's Bakery, which is scheduled to open in November, is a new business coming to Downey. It's one of the reasons Downey is on the list of most business-friendly cities in L.A. County. Under a deal to get city funds, Porto's agrees to maintain 40 full-time jobs for five years. (Stephen Carr, Staff Photographer)

friendly?

"We go out of our way to assist businesses in the community," said Metr  Anthony, who is the city's ombudsman.

Under the official title of redevelopment and economic development coordinator, Anthony acts as the liaison between the city and local businesses. Much like a concierge, he is the "go-to guy" for anything a business might need, from setting up meetings to help navigating through state, federal and local regulations.

"If we have to hold your hand from the point of filing the permit to development, we can do that," said Anthony, who has been with the city for 10 years.

Torrey Contreras, director of community development, said Cerritos also has a Business Spotlight Program. Similar to "Employee of the Month," the city each month highlights a local business, promoting it on the city website and inviting the business owner to meet the City Council.

Contreras said small touches like this and strong leadership by the City Council have ensured economic security over the years.

And the work has paid off.

The city generated about \$19 million in sales tax revenue for the fiscal year 2010. And new projects including a Kia auto dealership and a \$90 million mall expansion are expected to generate additional millions in revenue.

"Long before this (nomination) we were already a very business-friendly city," said Mayor Pro Tem Laura Lee. "We try to make the permit process as easy as possible."

Downey, enjoying its second consecutive nomination, considers itself a full-service city. It has been rated in the top 25 percent of "100 Best Cities to Do Business in California" by California Business magazine.

But these accolades are a recent achievement for the city, said 2nd District City Councilman Mario Guerra.

"Downey was not known as a proactive business community three or four years ago, but we have become aggressive," Guerra said.

To attract and retain businesses, City Council has developed a comprehensive economic strategy that includes:

- Simplified business tax renewals;
- Over-the counter permit processing;
- A development review committee;
- Business outreach program;
- Business watch program;
- Customer service surveys and channels for problem identification and solutions.
- And two redevelopment project areas — the Woodruff Industrial Project and the Firestone Redevelopment Project Area, which includes several noncontiguous parcels along Firestone Boulevard.

These economic efforts have helped Downey attract Porto's Bakery, which will open in early November; Bob's Big Boy Restaurant, and BJ's Restaurant and Brewhouse, which opened without public assistance.

Porto's Bakery, which has locations in Burbank and Glendale, is expected to draw 1,500 customers a day and be a cornerstone redevelopment property in downtown.

With Porto's Bakery and Bob's Big Boy, Downey provided city revenue for job creation.

In exchange, Porto's Bakery will maintain 40 full-time jobs for five years and Bob's Big Boy will provide 40 full-time positions for 15 years.

BJ's Restaurant and Brewhouse opened six months after applying with the city.

"It's an example of how streamlined our permitting process is," said Brian Saeki, Downey's director of economic development.

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