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The 42 Most Powerful People in Downtown

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Ranking the Movers, Shakers and Players of the Central City

by Jon Regardie

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DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - Power is often amorphous, something you can recognize more than touch. Anyone who has spent a few years in Downtown Los Angeles has a good sense of who's got juice.

This begs two important questions: 1) In a community chock full of power players, who are the most powerful?, and 2) How do you rank them?

Those who wield power in Downtown come primarily from a few fields: The top of the top in politics, business, labor and entertainment make most of the decisions that make the community go. There are also a few media and nonprofit folk who guide the civic discussion.

When it comes to determining the order, there's a simple exercise: Pretend you're a Downtowner with a modicum of power (though not enough for this roster). One afternoon you're talking on the phone with, for example, the 18th most powerful person on the list, developer Jim Thomas. Suddenly, your assistant rushes in with a piece of paper saying there's a call on the other line. If that person is less powerful than Thomas, you direct your assistant to say you're not available.

If the caller ranks higher, you tell Thomas, "Jim, I'm really sorry, but I've got Person X on the other line. I need to take it." Specifying who it is shows that you have some sway, and also that you're only breaking off a call with Jim Thomas for a darn good reason. When you say who the call is from, he may not like being cut off, but he'll understand that you don't keep Person X waiting. That's part of the game. As you read the list, ask yourself, "Would I hang up on this person for this other person?"

Here it is, the 2011 Downtown Power List.

42. Frank McCourt, Los Angeles Dodgers

Most of Los Angeles hates what he's done to the Dodgers and squirms over his legal tangles with Jamie. That said, he still owns a baseball team. At least for now.

41. Tom Gilmore, developer

Five years ago, amid a booming market, Gilmore would have ranked in the top 20. Circa 2011, the charismatic don of nouveau Downtown development is fairly quiet. Still, unlike everyone else in the entire world, he saw how a decrepit Historic Core block could become a booming hipster land and invented the Old Bank District. He planted the seed, and the rest is local residential history.

40. Alex Padilla, state senator

His Downtown ties these days are thin, but considering he's likely the only name Latino candidate running for mayor in 2013, he can't be overlooked. Even though he now labors in the state Senate and represents the 20th District in the Valley (only slightly more important to Downtown than Akron, Ohio), he's a past City Council president with a lot of names in his Rolodex. Or his iPhone contacts. Or whatever.

39. Father Gregory Boyle, Homeboy Industries



People who make the 2011 Downtown Power List include (l to r) AEG President and CEO Tim Leiweke, Councilman José Huizar, philanthropist Eli Broad and developer Rick Caruso.
Photo by Gary Leonard.

Last May, the pioneering gang intervention program helmed by Boyle nearly capsized with \$5 million in debt. Normally that's the kiss of death for a nonprofit, and even if it survives, the board usually tosses the boss. Not so with Boyle: He's still running the show and has Chinatown-based Homeboy financially afloat. The moral of the story: Never dismiss a guy unfazed by gangbangers with neck tattoos.

38. The BlogosphereThe first group entry in the list is a sign of changing times. A decade ago, blogs were the province of high-tech shut-ins. These days, those with sharp prose, a laptop and a mastery of social media can get their message in front of everyone who makes important decisions. While newspapers and TV remain the best option for traditional reporting, the blogs often blaze the trail, and can make a Downtown restaurant, shop, business or personality blow up in a hurry. Or help tear them down.

37. Gary Toebben, Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce

The Chamber had more influence decades ago, but as the president and CEO of a regional business group with 1,600 members, Toebben has the big seat at a still prominent table. Austin Beutner and Miguel Santana are among those who recently made the pilgrimage to the City West headquarters to speak to the Chamber's top dogs, and Toebben and his posse make regular lobbying trips to Sacramento and D.C., where they get an audience with the very high and mighty. Yes, I just wrote that Gary Toebben has a posse.

36. José Huizar, councilman

The 42-year-old 14th District councilman has four kids and a whopping five election victories (three for council, two for school board). He took some hits in the recent race against Rudy Martinez (the power lists, the alleged FBI investigation), but he gets major points for bringing Rick Caruso, Eli Broad and Tim Leiweke on board for his streetcar project. He could expand his reach if he alligator chomps more territory when council redistricting comes up.

35. Millage Peaks, Los Angeles Fire Department

He keeps a low profile, but have there been any LAFD scandals or major PR conflagrations since Peaks became chief in 2009? Exactly. Peaks works behind the scenes, and as many on this list can attest, sometimes power is best wielded subtly.

34. Gustavo Dudamel, Los Angeles Philharmonic

The wild-haired Venezuelan wunderkind may have no idea how to use his power, but the face of the Phil is the bridge between the current generation of local classical music fans and the one that doesn't exist yet. The big question is whether the Phil's music director will recognize that the conductor's baton is mightier than the pen and the sword.

33. Cedd Moses, barmaster

The head of 213 Inc. has made it safe and hip for thousands of the young and thirsty to get their drink on in Downtown. His Golden Gopher was the first of the new upscale bars, followed by the Broadway Bar. These days, he's got his fingers in nine local watering holes and is a go-to connection for anyone hoping to create a Downtown nightlife spot.

32. David Weinstein, MPG Office Trust

Weinstein isn't nearly as well known as Nelson Rising, his predecessor at the company formerly called Maguire Properties. However, when you're president and CEO of a firm that owns seven Downtown Class-A high-rises, no one ignores you. If he can save the beleaguered real estate giant, every banker and lawyer in a \$3,000 suit will want to do lunch with him.

31. Rick Caruso, gazillionaire

The man voted most likely to rocket up this list clocks in at number 32 only because he has yet to (publicly) decide if he'll run for mayor in 2013. The developer of the shopping complexes the Grove and the Americana is a regional force whose Downtown footprint has been small to date. If Mall Master Rick throws his hat in the mayoral ring and his hand in his checkbook, he'll find himself with more friends than Mark Zuckerberg.

30. Ron Nichols, Department of Water and Power

People tired of the city's water and power factory being run by folks with limited knowledge in the field

cheered the December hiring of the longtime utility consultant. The new DWP general manager has a full sink dealing with a distrustful council and an in-your-face union, but the fact that one of Nichols' first moves was sacking second-in-command Raman Raj shows he's come to play.

29. Ed Reyes, councilman

The Ol' Man River of City Council, even though he's not really that old (and doesn't have a deep baritone). First District rep Reyes keeps moving steadily on Los Angeles River and affordable housing issues. He also chairs the council's Planning and Land Use Management Committee. He's not flashy and doesn't fight publicly very often, but everyone knows that if you want to do market-rate housing in his district, you'd better have a healthy low-income element.

28. Blake Griffin, dunk machine

Just consider this subject line from a recent L.A. Area Chamber email: "Network with more than 20 different chambers then watch Blake Griffin." When big business uses a Clippers rookie to woo members to an after-hours mixer, you know the kid's got pull. The dunktastic power forward is giving the Clippers, L.A. Live and South Park restaurants and bars a financial bounce by luring big crowds to meaningless games.

27. Richard Alatorre, connected

It's been more than a decade since he held the 14th District council seat now occupied by Huizar, but this guy knows everyone and, more importantly, knows where the bodies are buried and the dollars are hidden. If you need to understand how things work on L.A.'s East Side, he's the first call. Heck, the strip of Broadway that falls in the 14th is still known as the Alatorre Finger.

26. Los Angeles Downtown News

What kind of journalists would we be if we didn't possess the reporter staples of a strong (or is that inflated?) sense of our own importance and the willingness to phone someone 600 times until they talk? The wise among us don't ignore a news organization founded almost 40 years ago.

25. Cardinal Roger Mahony/Archbishop Jose Gomez

Though he retired in February after a quarter century atop the Los Angeles Archdiocese, Mahony hasn't left the building. In fact, his connections, relationships and some of his stances (immigration reform, etc.) will live on through Gomez. When you represent L.A.'s 4 million Catholics, you're not just a religious figure — you're a politician.

24-23. Pat McOsker - United Firefighters Los Angeles City, Paul Weber - Los Angeles Police Protective League

Los Angeles' budget debacle has resulted in thousands of layoffs and early retirements, 26 days of furloughs a year for some city employees, and across-the-board cuts in city services. Yet LAPD and LAFD workers haven't felt much pain from the fiscal slash-and-burn, a feat directly attributable to the power of the unions representing their rank-and-file workers. McOsker of the UFLAC and Weber of the LAPPL have made their unions forces in local elections, too. The recent givebacks that the city and the Coalition of L.A. City Unions agreed to may provide pressure to Weber and McOsker to make similar cutbacks, but rest assured that if they give up something, they'll also get something.

22. Charlie Beck, Los Angeles Police Department

Former LAPD Chief William Bratton was a top 10 power player, but that's no slag on this cop's cop. Good ol' reliable Charlie Beck, who got the chief's badge in late 2009, is more a policeman than a politician, and few care about his wattage before TV cameras when he has managed to keep crime at historically low levels. The fact that the LAPD is only slowing hiring now, this far into the city budget crisis, indicates that no one wants to mess with Charlie.

21-19. Rick Orlov - Los Angeles Daily News, Dave Zahniser - Los Angeles Times, Dave Bryan - KCAL9/CBS2

The Fourth Estate has been butchered as the world increasingly gets its information from the Internet, but there remains a handful of folks consistently able to shape opinion or spark controversy with a single news story. Orlov has been breaking news longer than many people in business and politics have been alive; his Monday "Tipoff" column is a must-read. Zahniser is tenacious; his dogged determination and ability to nullify

spin makes him adored by many and feared by more. Bryan, the only full-time political reporter on local TV news, uses decades of relationships to get interviews others dream about. He also has the ability to make a complicated matter easily digestible in a two-minute City Hall stand-up.

18. Jim Thomas, developer

When megabucks shipping firm Hanjin decided to raze and rebuild the Wilshire Grand hotel, but needed a local partner, it reached out to Thomas Properties Group and its head, Jim Thomas. Smart move, and at a time when almost nothing is being built, Thomas has shepherded the \$1 billion project through the approvals process. It's only the latest bit of Houdini-like magic from Thomas, who has brought City National Plaza back from the dead and, before that, partnered with Rob Maguire to make a slew of office towers appear on the Downtown skyline.

17. Eric Garcetti, councilman

Smart, charismatic, and the president of the Los Angeles City Council for six years, the 13th District representative has the juicy job of deciding which council members get plum assignments like the Budget & Finance Committee, and who gets stuck with Education & Neighborhoods. He's both a Rhodes Scholar and a friend of business (he regularly appears on stage at the CCA's annual Treasures of L.A. luncheon) and is ahead of the City Hall curve on social media and other tech matters. By the way, he's probably running for mayor in 2013.

16. Gloria Molina, supervisor

If you want to do something on the east side of Los Angeles County, there's one path: through Molina's office. Her 20 years as a supe have born fruit and produced myriad projects all across the district, with the latest being this month's opening of the La Plaza de Cultura y Artes near Olvera Street. Like many on this list, she has tangled with some high-profile players for reasons even they don't understand. Yet as proof of her power, consider that some of those who rank higher on this list are loath to criticize her on the record. They don't want the fight or the fallout.

15. Mark Ridley-Thomas, supervisor

The millions the unions spent on his Second District election victory over Bernard Parks leads some to mislabel Ridley-Thomas as a labor-only guy. That's foolish. During his time on the City Council in the '90s, he helped make Staples Center happen when the area's council rep, Rita Walters, bizarrely opposed the project. While Ridley-Thomas' Downtown territory is slim (mainly Exposition Park and parts of the Figueroa Corridor and Skid Row), his experience in city and state elected posts give him connections to both people and money. Those union ties don't hurt either.

14. Carmen Trutanich, city attorney

Trutanich is at once the strangest and most compelling elected figure in Los Angeles. He won a race no one thought he had a prayer of capturing, and has since irked the mayor and city leaders to the point that they've decimated his budget. Instead of shutting up, he takes audacious swings (his own grand jury?!). That said, the son of San Pedro never stops working, and he gets credit for the city making legal headway on issues where it had stumbled for years, such as pot clinics and billboards. He also secured an injunction against Skid Row drug dealers. Like the Lakers in the playoffs, he's not someone you want to face off against. The big question: Will he run for District Attorney?

13. Wendy Greuel, city controller

The former Valley councilwoman's audits are not as flashy as those of her predecessor, Laura Chick, but Greuel has been a force on the other, actually larger side of the Controller's office: She's given Angelenos frequent attention-demanding reports on the city's finances. Of course, the audits are pretty good too, as was Greuel's move to be the first person to declare for the 2013 mayor's race. Her political ties go back to the Bradley administration and she's got connections to the entertainment industry (she was an executive at Dreamworks). She's also shown a willingness to go toe-to-toe, as happened when she tangled with Trutanich.

12. The Lobbyists

In Los Angeles, when the going gets tough, the tough hire lobbyists. When the tough hire lobbyists, money flows faster and thicker than trash in the Los Angeles River. In 2010, lobbying firms registered in L.A. reported receiving more than \$34 million from clients, according to records filed with the City Ethics Commission. That's a lot of meetings at City Hall. Whether it's billboards, golf carts, land use, food contracts

or something else, when it comes to making things happen, these are the people who never sleep.

11. Brian D'Arcy, IBEW Local 18

Trying to figure out D'Arcy's rise is sort of like trying to decipher how an Escher staircase comes together. The business manager (read, boss) of the union representing DWP employees really only ascended to his current lofty status once people started talking about his rising profile — did he go up on his own or did the rhetoric do it? What matters more is his record: While the city was laying off and furloughing people in 2009, the pugnacious D'Arcy actually secured raises for his workers. His biggest test is to come as he encounters new DWP GM Ron Nichols.

10. Richard Riordan, ex-mayor

Actually, ex-mayor is only the beginning for the man who left office in 2001 but continues to play a big role behind the scenes. He remains a deep-pockets philanthropist with a focus on education, and last year when he talked about the city speed skating toward bankruptcy, everyone listened. He could become a kingmaker in the 2013 mayor's race.

9. John Perez, Assembly speaker

Although Perez doesn't figure much in the day-to-day happenings of the Central City, this Downtown resident's position means he can direct enormous influence, and money, to local efforts. The state's budget boondoggle, and its corresponding impact on local matters (adios Community Redevelopment Agency) means everyone wants face time with this cousin of Antonio Villaraigosa. By the way, speaker of the Assembly happens to be a killer springboard to better things, as Villaraigosa can attest.

8. Maria Elena Durazo, labor powerhouse

At the dog and pony show that was the announcement of the Farmers Field naming rights deal, one labor leader was invited to speak: That was Durazo, who as executive secretary-treasurer of the County Federation of Labor/AFL-CIO helms a coalition of 300 unions representing more than 800,000 trades people. Know that when developers cozy up to the politicians, they also come asking for Durazo's blessing — in turn, she asks for jobs with union pay and benefits. Few knew how the widow of Miguel Contreras would fare when, in 2006, she took the position he once held. Five years later, there's no doubt: You still don't mess with the County Fed.

7. Zev Yaroslavsky, supervisor

Another longtime playa whose high ranking is bolstered by a presumed run for Villaraigosa's seat in 2013. An elected leader since he was about 4 (actually, 26, when he joined the City Council), he has held the Third District Valley/Westside seat for 17 years. Strong on transportation, experienced in financial matters and with connections a president or pope would envy, he's known for exerting his will, others' desires be damned. A lot could happen between now and the mayoral primary, but the man with an M.A. in British Imperial History (really!) is a top contender.

6. Carol Schatz, Central City Association

Many people had a hand in the Downtown upswing of the past decade, but few stirred the pot harder and to better effect than Schatz, the president and CEO of the CCA. After 20 years with Downtown's most potent business group, her role is varied: She hosts major discussions (Leiweke unveiled many of his stadium plans at a CCA luncheon), lures business to the community (a current focus is Seventh Street) and pushes legislation (she helped craft the adaptive reuse ordinance). She also persuaded a mass of business owners to tax themselves and form Downtown's largest business improvement district. She acknowledges that you need sharp elbows in this community, and it's gotten her in plenty of battles. She's won most of them.

5. Antonio Villaraigosa, mayor

Ah, there was so much hope and expectation when he flew into office in 2005: While Villaraigosa still has pull (witness the recent agreement on givebacks with the Coalition of L.A. City Unions), he never mastered the mayoral bully pulpit and, worse, doesn't scare people (witness the council recently thumbing its nose at AnVil and delaying new police hires until July 1). You could write a book about the high hopes and hard landings of the Villaraigosa administration (someone probably will), but as he nears lame-duck status, he risks a legacy that lacks a single defining achievement. Yes, there's still significant power attached to the office, but he'll be haunted by everything from the failure to make the 30-10 mass transit dream deal happen to the dissolution of his marriage while he was mayor. He should be top two or three on this list; his placement here says more

about him than those who rank higher.

4. Austin Beutner, first deputy mayor

Here are a few positives Los Angeles has recorded in the past year: Chinese car manufacturer BYD signed a deal to open a plant in Downtown; the failed 12-2 development reform initiative was finally euthanized and replaced by a new plan that has serious backing; a three-year "business tax holiday" was launched, and has helped bring companies like architecture firm Gensler into Downtown. Is it any coincidence that all those (and more) happened after former venture capitalist Beutner joined Villaraigosa's office for a salary of \$1 a year? In other words, in 15 months he's pulled a list of accomplishments that exceed what most people in city government do in five years. This pal of Riordan is another possible mayoral candidate. The business community already adores him. It remains to be seen if the rest of Los Angeles will.

3. Jan Perry, councilwoman

If this were a Los Angeles-wide list, the Ninth District representative would be much further down. In Downtown, however, the woman elected to office in 2001 has hit all the bases: She's got business cred for propelling housing, restaurants and bars, and championing L.A. Live, the Wilshire Grand project and the Grand Avenue plan. The residents like Perry because she has pushed for a slew of community amenities. Even the majority of the Skid Row services community applauds her work (she's also pulled some nice achievements in South L.A.). Not only that, she's smart, tough and doesn't take kindly to intimidation — she recently had some harsh words for the labor groups trying to teach Councilman Bernard Parks a lesson by financially propping up his election challenger. The Downtown stakeholders generally think of Perry as the best area representative in decades, and they'll be there for her, financially and otherwise, as she too runs for mayor.

2. Eli Broad, philanthropist

In a town packed with one-note wonders, Eli Broad stands out for his depth: He founded two billion-dollar companies (home builder Kaufman Broad and retirement investment firm SunAmerica) and has emerged as the leading philanthropic voice in the region through his Broad Foundation. His involvement in Downtown stretches back decades, from helping found MOCA to working on plans in the '90s to upgrade Grand Avenue and bring football back to the Coliseum. Football is no longer his focus but Grand Avenue is, and while Broad pushes for Related Cos.' stalled mega-plan, he also is building his \$100 million art museum across from the Colburn School. By the way, did you notice how L.A. jumped through hoops to get that project? But wait, there's more: Broad is on board with the streetcar effort, and whomever he backs in the mayor's race will see their stock rise. Some complain that he's tough to deal with, but you don't get his CV by being a patsy.

1. Tim Leiweke, Anschutz Entertainment Group

Calling Leiweke's rise meteoric is an understatement: Just 15 years after coming to Los Angeles, the president and CEO of AEG has notched Downtown a \$400 million arena (Staples Center), a \$2.5 billion entertainment complex (L.A. Live) and a \$1 billion tower (the Convention Center hotel). Granted, he did those with billionaire Phil Anschutz's money (the MacFarlane Group also played a big financial role in the hotel), but it is a remarkable achievement nonetheless. Everyone listens to him, which is necessary considering he's now engaged in his biggest challenge yet: the vision quest to create a \$1 billion South Park football stadium/events complex (a project that also needs Anschutz's blessing and bankroll). Right now, everyone in Downtown wants to be a Friend of Tim and help make the deal happen, knowing it would have an economic ripple (tidal wave?) across the community. Numerous local power players have failed in the past to win on football, but many people on this list say they'd never bet against Leiweke — on this project or any other.

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