How has the economic development profession changed over the course of your career?

I first became involved with economic development around 1970. [This was] about ten years after I began my career with the City of Long Beach. I was an administrative assistant to the City Manager of Long Beach, and economic development was a new issue for me. The City of Long Beach was in a serious economic decline in the early-1970s. My assignment was to figure out what to do. I surveyed the organizations that were involved in economic development at that time. Of course, we didn’t have internet, so it was not easy to do. I actually bumped into something called the HUB Council [which] had a lot of the icons of early economic development involved in it. Ed DeLuca, Andy Bennett, and Ken Patton were involved.

The folks from the HUB Council came out and spoke to us in Long Beach, and it was the most engaged economic development organization I could find. In fact, most people didn’t really know what economic development was, what it could be, or how much it could mean to their communities. So, I became engaged, and the HUB Council quickly morphed into CUED. At that time, we also brought Jim Peterson on board as the Executive Director of the organization. We began to have regular meetings [and get] engaged with Congress. Folks worried about jobs and tax revenues in the United States. [The organization] was predominantly focused on the East Coast and the Rust Belt. That was where they were having the greatest hemorrhage of jobs and tax revenues. We sensed that California wasn’t far behind, so we got onboard. That was really the beginning of economic development in Long Beach, California, and probably the beginning of it in California.

What were some of the most pressing economic development issues during your career?

People became aware of economic development and began to evaluate it. It became apparent to me that different communities had different economic development problems. One community might have a problem related to the loss of manufacturing jobs. Another community might have a dearth of qualified labor [and be unable] to attract businesses. There was a panoply of issues surrounding economic development. There was no [single] solution for any one city.

Economic development was multifaceted, and you needed to understand all of those facets to undertake an effective economic development program. That is where CUED came into play. The professionals who were [developing] the “art and craft of economic development” at that time each had a different take on what was the most serious problem in the various communities. Because of that, CUED [took] a broad approach to dealing with the problem. The organization began to educate professionals [about] the various facets of economic development and how those problems could be solved. Those were the core, and the roots, of economic development. The professionals recognized that there was no one solution and no one fix. There were lots of different aspects to it. That really was the beginning of the growth of the study of economic development.
Can you describe your own personal career path and how it evolved?

I may have been, at least on the West Coast, the first city manager that actually came up with an economic development focus. I was given an assignment as a young administrative assistant in the city manager’s office. [The project] was mostly focused on a seriously blighted and depressed 350-acre area of the City of Long Beach called the Westside Industrial Zone. It was an area that was ripe for redevelopment, [and] redevelopment had just started in California in the mid-1950s. [However], at that point it had not been linked to economic development. As part of my assignment, it became apparent to me that this Westside Industrial Zone would become the focus of the city’s recovery efforts. It would be transformed into a modern industrial/business park. In doing that, I began to study the economic development organizations in other parts of the country. [I studied] the Atlanta First movement in Atlanta, Ed DeLuca’s work in Baltimore, [and the work being done in] Philadelphia.

I recommended to the city manager that an economic development corporation be formed in Long Beach to work closely with the city on issues of relating to economic development. [It would] also become a marketing arm for the city and do things the city couldn’t really do very well. [It would] spend money on attracting industry and [make] a real marketing effort. They accepted the recommendation, and I worked closely with the fellows putting the economic development corporation together. They were all public-spirited business people. In that effort, we decided to go out and try to recruit and hire an executive vice president. Instead of that, they decided that they wanted me to do it. I was loaned, through a service contract, to the Long Beach Economic Development Corporation from the City of Long Beach. That really became the start. We formed an organization and hired people. We collected dues. We had a contract with the city, and we had a budget of about $250,000 per year. We began analyzing idle and surplus city properties. We began a marketing effort everywhere there was an opportunity to locate a business.

The interesting part is that the Westside Industrial project was going to be a star-crossed project. The whole notion of redevelopment really rubbed a lot of the property owners over there the wrong way. They basically fought that redevelopment project “tooth and nail.” A six- or seven-year litigation pretty much brought the project to a screeching halt. In the meantime, we were able to focus on a lot of other properties and get the whole economic development issue going. By that time, the litigation had caused the Economic Development Corporation to basically disband. None of those businessmen wanted to be sued over that Westside redevelopment project, so it just collapsed. But, the economic development effort was firmly entrenched with the city. That was [absorbed] into their community development department along with redevelopment, the housing authority, and other issues. That was really how we began the organization that brought all of the city’s development functions, including block-grant management, together. I was appointed the Director of Community Development.

By that time, I had become the Executive Assistant for Economic Development. Then, I became the Director of Community Development. It basically was my pathway to economic development during the beginning of that industrial redevelopment effort. During that time, I was recruited by the Virginia Peninsula Economic Development Council to be their first
Executive Vice President. That organization served seven cities and counties in the tidewater area of Virginia…what is known as the Southside. I went back to Virginia for three years and organized that effort, which is still going to this day.

Then, I was recruited back to Los Angeles County to head their Community Development Commission. I organized it exactly as I had organized the efforts in Long Beach. [It] included redevelopment, economic development, housing authority, and block-grant management. We put all of the development tools in one organization. I served in that capacity, organizing that commission from the ground-up. It is still operating today, and it’s a very effective organization. I served there for three years. Then, I was appointed the Chief Administrative Officer for the County of Los Angeles. County supervisors loved to have these economic development activities, because [the projects] were very visible and it gave them a lot of opportunities for ribbon cutting. It gave me tremendous exposure to the political leadership of that county, and they decided that they wanted me to be their Chief Administrative Officer. The Chief Administrative Officer position in the county of Los Angles is a big deal. At that time, I had a budget of about $7 billion and 75,000 employees under my direction. I worked directly with the county’s board of supervisors, which was a body of five. They were also the Community Development Commission, so they served in that capacity as well.

I served there for a few years and was recruited back to Long Beach as their City Manager. I wanted to come back to Long Beach because I felt I had unfinished business. Also, it was where I lived. Although I found the county assignment very challenging and rewarding, it was not as hands-on as I wanted it to be. It was “administration from 20,000 feet high,” and I really liked hands-on administration, which was what the City of Long Beach City Manager job gave me. Essentially, all of the bureau chiefs and department heads worked for me as “at-will employees.” In the county, the only people that worked for me were my direct staff. Everyone else was a civil service professional, and it was difficult to get everybody moving in the same direction at the same time. I served for twelve years as City Manager of Long Beach. We had an excellent economic development program. I think it was recognized nationwide a time or two.

When I was with the county in the early-1980s, I was instrumental in setting up the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation. I served on that board, and I still do. I became Chair of that organization from 1992 to 1994. That got me involved in the county’s economic development effort. After I retired as City Manager in 1998, I took over as Chief Executive Officer of the Alameda Corridor Transportation Authority. [The organization] was building a $2.4 billion project. It was the biggest public works project in the western United States, [and it was] roughly equivalent to the “Big Dig.” We finished that project in four years, [and] we brought it in on time and about $300-$400 million dollars under budget.

Then, I promised myself I would retire for good, but I’m now the Senior Vice President of Government Relations for PsomasFMG. None of that would have happened without economic development.

What skills did you acquire over time? Did certain skills become more important as your career progressed?
I came to have a real appreciation for the importance of economic development as an ongoing effort to make communities feel good about themselves. I think there is a great opportunity for people who are natural cheerleaders to get involved in economic development. It is not like the chamber of commerce. The chamber of commerce is more about meetings in most places, and economic development tends to be more about projects. But economic development gives communities an opportunity to succeed and to celebrate their successes. I think that’s incredibly important. If you find a community isn’t able to celebrate its success, you’re going to find a community that is basically in a serious problem of municipal inferiority. Economic development—through its active marketing of communities and [showing] their good points—gives the opportunity for communities to become cheerleaders for themselves.

Throughout your career, were there common challenges that you had to overcome? Or were the challenges significantly different in each community?

There is a totally different attitude in the Southeast than there is on the West Coast. In the South, there is more of a desperation which I think leads them to be very aggressive economic developers. [They] probably tend to be a little bit more creative. In California, I think the need wasn’t felt so strongly, so economic development has not been as aggressive. I think that’s why you have right-to-work states. The power and influence of unions in California has been a leveling influence that has been a bit of a problem in terms of pursuing economic development. I think it has probably hurt the state in the long-term. I consider California [to be less] aggressive in its approach to economic development. It tends to search for public sector solutions more than private sector solutions.

How did you overcome this challenge?

I don’t think it has been overcome. I think the State of California—because of its political realities—has become a state which is not as receptive to new businesses. It is not as receptive to meeting economic development challenges—as they relate to jobs and taxes—as [is] the Southeast. I think it’s to California’s detriment, frankly. I think anybody who is a student of government in California can see that. Economic development in California has primarily been achieved through redevelopment efforts. I don’t think that’s the case in the South. In the South, I think it’s primarily been achieved through marketing. I wouldn’t say those things are polar opposites, but they are both economic development tools. [However], I think the South is more receptive to business because of their use of tools [like] industrial development bonds. [It’s also because] they’re right-to-work states. I think the Northeast suffers from the same problems as California.

Throughout your career, was there anyone that inspired you? A mentor?

I was inspired by a lot of people. I was inspired by Ken Patton, who is probably one of the smartest people I’ve ever known. I was inspired by Ron Kysiak, who is a policy [guru] of the first order. I was inspired by Andy Bennett, and I was certainly inspired by Ed DeLuca. All of those people were inspirational. They were the giants of the field. I served on the CUED Board with both [Ken Patton and Ron Kysiak]. I was an officer under Ken when he was CUED Chairman. I was vice-chair when Ron was chair. Then, I became Chairman.
Economic development [then] was a very collaborative effort during very hard times for the country. Economic development was not a particularly welcomed subject at the federal level.

**How did your involvement with CUED affect your own career development?**

I don’t think I would have achieved what I achieved had it not been for economic development. As I look back, I doubt that there is any way I could have moved up and through the various levels of municipal government had I not had an economic development focus. If I had a budget or personnel [focus], I would have been one of thousands. [But,] because I got engaged in economic development, I was able to demonstrate a career trajectory that was most unheard of. There are very few people that can say they had been the chief administrative officer of the largest urban county in America, a city manager of the thirty-second largest city in the country, and also the chief executive officer of a major public works project. None of that would have happened without economic development as my core focus.

**How did you see CUED through you involvement in the organization?**

It got smarter just like we did. It became more aware of [the] greater opportunities to attract upwardly mobile professionals [from] across the country. It grew through excellent programming and affective advocacy at the federal level. With that growth, it became more relevant to the needs of the times. That’s how I think CUED helped a lot.

The merger with AEDC was critical to the overall growth of the organization. I think it became the most relevant. The programs and the conferences that were sponsored were all about what was happening *then*. [There were about] what the organization’s professionals needed to know in order to be successful *then*. It evolved because all of those issues were evolving issues.

**Were you involved with the merger between CUED and AEDC?**

That was not on my watch. I was an Honorary Member of the board. I certainly was very supportive. Tom Blanchard, who was one of my vice presidents, came after me. [The merger] is certainly something we had talked about. We had not been able to maneuver into a position where it made sense, but it certainly was a good idea.

**What were the reasons for the merger?**

We kept butting heads with [AEDC]. They were sort of characterized as the “smokestack chasers.” We had a more global view of economic development. We were more into business analysis, and they were about getting factories at any cost. They were heavily engaged with industrial realtors. I think it became apparent to us that we were both “fishing in the same pool,” and that we could create an organization which was even stronger if we came together. That was certainly our theory at the time. The people who held that notion ultimately prevailed in both organizations.

**Do you think the merger was successful?**
From my perspective, it has [been successful]. That was also a great tribute to the organizational skills of Jeff Finkle. I think he has done a magnificent job along those lines. Yes, I do think that it has been successful. I don’t see any other organizations that are evolving into a position to challenge [IEDC] as the preeminent economic development organization.

**Where do you see IEDC moving into the future?**

In all fairness, I have not been as engaged with the organization except through reading the materials and that sort of thing. I haven’t had the need professionally. I have to spend what time I have in reviewing things that are affecting me personally. I have to learn the important aspects of what I do now. Right now, that is solar development. I’m the Senior Vice President for Governmental Relations.

As you might expect, I’m not a solar engineer. PomasFMG is a joint venture formed by one of the oldest engineering companies in California. It has completed over 60,000 projects for public agencies. FMG—First Management Group—which is what I’m a part of, does turnkey solar developments for local public agencies and private industries. We take advantage of federal and state incentives to form public-private partnerships to install turnkey solar. We’re opening a ten megawatt project in the Antelope Valley Union High School District on October 7, 2010. That’s a $50 million project. It will save them $42 million over the life of the twenty-year power-purchase agreement. We’re doing another one for Palmdale, CA [that] forms a private entity to take advantage of federal tax incentives. Then we [can] deliver our systems to the public agency at a much lower cost.

**Where do you see the economic development profession going into the future?**

In California we have CALED (California Association of Local Economic Developers). I don’t think there will be a lack of need for economic development and economic developers. Those who are very smart, those who understand how to market to communities, and those who understand how to package transactions [will be needed]. At the end of the day, it’s all a transactional process. You need somebody willing to buy something or sell something…whether it’s a site or a product. I think that’s what economic developers understand.

**Do you have any other stories or anecdotes you would like to share?**

Let’s see, I probably have a bunch. My biggest disappointment is that we almost had a large Disney Sea here in Long Beach. I worked very hard on that for a couple of years, but it didn’t come to fruition. But, I think you learn as much from your failures as you do your successes.