

# El Segundo Rising

Call it small. Call it smoky. Just don't call it stagnant. Our northernmost South Bay city enjoys a residential and commercial boom ... with no signs of letting up.

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The city of El Segundo achieved incorporation nearly a century ago ... in 1917 to be exact. Farmland was transformed as big business took root, and a municipal airport that later became LAX was built. Back then, the frontrunners of change were Standard Oil (now Chevron) and Northrop Grumman—the company that blazed the trail for El Segundo to become globally recognized as the aerospace capital of the world.

For decades, aerospace, defense and energy defined El Segundo. But on the heels of the recent recession, industry downsizing and economic revitalization have made way for urban reinvention.

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**Nothing is more powerful than an idea  
whose time has come.**

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The city is now second to San Francisco with the most Fortune 500 companies in California and is a magnet for small businesses that are game-changers in their own right. It is still home to Northrop and Chevron as well as other large industry leaders such as Mattel and DIRECTV, while a

mélange of thriving entrepreneurs, the Los Angeles Kings and Lakers, family-owned businesses, world-class eateries and retail stores, an art museum, galleries, surf shops, tree-lined neighborhoods, parks and athletic fields, and more also proudly lay claim to the 90245 zip code.

Today El Segundo is where small-town charm meets leading-edge downtown commerce steeped in forward-thinking diversity and creativity. Its incredible journey is anything but ordinary.

## A NEW BUSINESS FRONTIER

Boasting more than \$1 billion of active and planned commercial real estate development, El Segundo buzzes with laser-beam focus on the future. According to Alex Rose, senior vice president of Continental Development Corporation, “Our company has been here for 50 years. With the primary historical jobs base shifting, we—along with the city—have the opportunity to create a more balanced and thriving community.”

New commercial development—such as the state-of-the-art Apollo at Rosecrans and the Utah Avenue Campus office redevelopments, the Elevon office complex and the upcoming retail and entertainment spaces at The Point (phase two of Campus El Segundo)—have been architecturally designed not only as innovative places to do business but also as employees’ homes-away-from-home.

Modern technology and sustainability are merged in contemporary open workspaces, with great attention to convenience and comfort to promote productivity. Features such as balconies with ocean breezes, outdoor team-building and recreation areas, car-charging stations, bicycle racks and dog-friendly workplaces are the new norm.



### **MASTER BUILDER** Commerical developer Alex Rose surveys one of his signature El Segundo projects in motion, Elevon.

So what has propelled the resurgence of El Segundo? “Most importantly the people, their values, the culture, excellent schools and the South Bay lifestyle,” says Alex. “Add to that the ease of accessibility with close proximity to LAX, freeways and public transit, a significant amount of unutilized land, the opportunity to work close to home and reasonable rents and real estate as other Beach Cities have become more populated.”

For him and others who have chosen El Segundo, a community is more than a collection of buildings. “Our company embraces that, and when we put a development footprint down, our philanthropic support and involvement in the arts, health, education and youth always follows,” he says.

“We are proud to be a part of El Segundo’s growth and contributing to it becoming an even better place.”

No longer a Beach Cities stepchild, today’s El Segundo emerges as a trendsetting civic leader. A city that once looked to other successful California communities for inspiration and urban know-how is now charting its own course. As the second millennium offers a new chapter in local history and the new moves alongside the old, El Segundo’s heritage remains revered—not solely for its aerospace roots and carefully preserved historic downtown but at the core of the community’s spirit.

## ENTREPRENEURS & THE AMERICAN DREAM

*“Nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come.”*

These words, penned by French novelist Victor Hugo, succinctly speak to the soulful engine behind El Segundo’s growing entrepreneurial workforce. This city of innovation and invention is no longer just an engineering and PhD mecca of brilliance. A new wave of brainiacs, trendsetting entrepreneurs and artists have joined the ranks and are making a significant social and economic impact while living the American dream.

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El Segundo’s Smoky Hollow district, with industrial warehouses clad in exposed brick and roll-up garage doors, has become an inspirational haven for entrepreneurs with big dreams, talent and grit—such as fashion photographer Dani Brubaker, who founded Smoky Hollow Studios. Dani moved from Oklahoma to Hermosa Beach in 1999 with her 7-year-old daughter, Alexandre, in tow. Little did she know that six years later a Christmas celebration in the South Bay would change the course of her career and her life.

“I received a camera in 2005 as a Christmas gift, and I started taking photos as a hobby,” says Dani, who has a background as an art director. “I took a lot of family portraits and began marketing myself to the fashion industry. Then I started to shoot for a bunch of small fashion brands after walking the floors of trade shows to get my foot in the door. My first big break was shooting a kids campaign for Calvin Klein. Clients hire photographers for their vision and how they see things and perceive the world. I was raised in the foster care system until I was 3, which I attribute my great authentic connection with kids to.”

Inspired by photo shoots at the Castle Gibson studios in London, in between her travels and projects Dani kept a watchful eye on buildings for sale in the Smoky Hollow district.

“The Castle Gibson studios have a lot of character and charm, and I wanted to create something like it in LA. When this building became available in 2011, I bought it and designed the studio—all with great encouragement and guidance from Dawn Welch, my business consultant in Oklahoma.”

With an impressive roster of clients (Hugo Boss, Nordstrom and Lands’ End, to name a few), Dani’s vision of a Castle Gibson-influenced photo studio became a reality. But she did not expect that it would evolve into something even bigger. “A client of mine got married in my studio, and thanks to the power of social media, more weddings, birthday parties and other special events are often held here.”

Dani became so taken with El Segundo that she and her daughter also moved there from Hermosa Beach not long ago. Since she travels frequently, being closer to the airport was important, as well as great schools and working near home.

“El Segundo has a hometown vibe to it that is very similar to living in Oklahoma,” Dani shares. “People wave at each other, neighbors talk to each other and everything is in walking distance. And there are no parking meters! It’s been a long journey to get to this place and a lot of hard work. I am extremely grateful for my life.”

The Smoky Hollow district is also the office location for Beyond Meat—producers of plant-based meat alternatives. Cofounder and Manhattan Beach native Brent Taylor was working in conjunction with a venture capital fund that was interested in the replication of meat when he met and partnered with Beyond Meat founder and CEO, Ethan Brown—a perfect fit for Brent’s extensive agriculture and food background.

After looking at other cities including Santa Barbara, New Orleans, Denver and Columbia, Missouri (where their manufacturing plant is), Brent persuaded Maryland-based Ethan to open their headquarters in El Segundo.

“We wanted to be taken very seriously as a company, and I knew that El Segundo was very business-friendly with a lot of big businesses,” Brent explains. “When I initially suggested it to Ethan, since he wasn’t familiar with El Segundo it took some convincing to get him to fly out to take a look. But when we drove around and he saw the small-town atmosphere, nearby beaches, the healthy lifestyle, proximity to the airport and the potential for positive cultural impact for our employees, that was all it took.”

With a leap of faith, in 2012 Ethan moved his family and his business to Southern California from a small, quiet town in Maryland. He likes to say

that he came to Los Angeles with “two world views.” He is no stranger to city life, with an upbringing in D.C. and Maryland, but it was childhood weekends on the family’s farm that most influenced his life and was the inspiration behind Beyond Meat.

“When I was a kid I loved the James Herriot book *All Creatures Great and Small*, and I wanted to be a veterinarian. I failed to make the distinction between agriculture animals and animals we had in the house. I never understood why a pig is different than a dog and why a cow is different than a horse,” says Ethan.

He later found himself in the energy sector, similar to the career trajectory of his friends, as he resisted the animal-loving calling in his heart. In his 20s the calling became louder as he continued to question why meat had to come from animals.



**WELL-POSITIONED El Segundo’s promising future, L to R: Brent Taylor and Ethan Brown of Beyond Meat; Dani Brubaker of Smoky Hollow Studios; and Mike Mothner of Wpromote.**

He turned his attention to creating a plant-based, fast-food business and began to invest in vegan restaurants. He soon learned that there was high demand for people wanting to eat healthy, and he began researching. In 2008 his research led him to the University of Missouri, where the technology that Beyond Meat uses at its Missouri processing plant was originally licensed.

With his partner, Brent, and notable investors on board—including Bill Gates, Twitter cofounders Biz Stone and Evan Williams, and The Humane Society of the United States—Ethan’s calling is being realized as they together make a difference on the planet.

“It’s the power of the idea. If we solve the problems of the protein supply at the center of the plate, we can simultaneously make a difference in climate change, natural resources, health and animal welfare,” he says.

According to Brent, “Our investors are very passionate about finding solutions to solve those issues, and they love our product. We met with Bill Gates so he could sample our products as we do with all of our investors. The taste experience is king! We are regularly hauling coolers with product samples through airports across the country and overseas.”

When they aren’t on the road promoting Beyond Meat, true to their earth-loving spirits both Ethan and Brent ride a bike to work several days per week. “Our move to El Segundo was driven by lifestyle choices for us and for our employees. Our products are very health- and wellness-oriented, so creating a positive work/life balance was important to us. This is who we are,” says Brent.

Not far from the Smoky Hollow district, on the fifth floor of a conventional office building on Walnut Avenue, is Wpromote—a leading online

marketing company and the brainchild of CEO, internet pioneer and Manhattan Beach native Mike Mothner. A business that started in a dorm room at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire is now 150 employees strong and growing.

The time, sweat and perseverance between college days and landing Fortune 500 clients such as Toyota and Verizon make for attention-grabbing storytelling. In 2003 Mike returned to the South Bay and hired two of his childhood friends whom he “derailed from their paths to law school” to be his first employees: Mike Block, COO, and Mike Stone, CRO. They had been pals since Halloween trick-or-treating in fourth grade and were Mira Costa High School alums.



**LAYING ROOTS** Local mom Lee Boyles and her brood at El Segundo’s Recreation Park.

“I was working out of my apartment and Mike Block was my roommate when we launched a new ad campaign for our very first client,” says Mike Mothner. “We were on the phone when the client said, ‘You aren’t just two guys working out of your garage, are you?’ We were actually in the bedroom, so I said, ‘No!’ When we hung up I looked at Block and said, ‘I think we are going to need an office.’”

The first official office for Wpromote was in an executive suite for two people in Pacific Corporate Towers on Grand and Sepulveda. It was a small, 10-by-10-foot room that they squeezed four people into.

They later moved to a larger office with some trepidation, as they wondered about how they would ever fill it. Four more moves after that landed them at the Walnut Avenue office, where they help businesses of all sizes market themselves online—from small mom-and-pop shops to Fortune 500 companies on Wall Street.

“We built Wpromote on the backs of small businesses, including our first client. One of our divisions works with small local businesses, which is fundamentally the same as the other division for bigger, more complex accounts. Both leverage the same expertise and technology platform that we built in the dorm room 13 years ago,” boasts Mothner.

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With roughly 66% of the company’s 150 employees graduating from college in California (USC being the most represented school) and all three Mikes having South Bay roots, setting up shop in El Segundo was a natural fit.

"I never had a job, so I just went with what felt right," Mothner explains. "Our goal was to create a spectacular place to work, which we have done. That bleeds over into the work we do, and our clients then enjoy working with smiling, happy people. If we were to ever move out of El Segundo, it would impact everyone's commute, including my three-mile dream commute that I finally created. So our flag is firmly planted here!"

## NO PLACE LIKE HOME

An unexpected small-town lifestyle juxtaposed with one of the world's busiest airports and downtown commerce is a cornerstone of El Segundo's unique allure. Often referred to as "Mayberry by the sea," El Segundo is home to more than 16,000 people and is touted as a perfect place to raise a family.

"We have outstanding schools, a great mix of cultures, a tight-knit, safe community close to the beach, lots of children's programs, beautiful parks, wonderful restaurants and stores, street fairs," says Lee Boyles, a mother of five. "I do most all of my family shopping in El Segundo, and almost everything you need is within walking distance. People joke that you never have to leave 'the Gundo' if you don't want to—and some don't!"

Like most American small towns, baseball is taken very seriously in El Segundo. That's not surprising, given that history-making Major League Baseball player George Brett hails from there.

In addition to baseball, the Boyles kids' sports activities include surfing, skiing, swimming, soccer and football. "The schools and the city promote sports teams and offer programs for kids of all ages, such as Little League and AYSO soccer," says Lee, whose children—with husband, Drew—enjoy not only athletics but also music and the arts.

"We now have an art museum in our city," she continues. "Brian and Ava Sweeney opened El Segundo Museum of Art (ESMoA) as a place to house their personal art collection, and it has become so much more. The museum is spreading the love of art to youth."

A highlight of the year for many El Segundo residents is the holiday parade, with city officials, bands, cheerleaders, vintage cars and more. "I am proud to say that my family participates in the parade each year, and we have won awards for spirit, creativity and other things," Lee says. "We have been out there in blue wigs, dancing down the street to music and having fun with our neighbors."

In addition to Santa Claus being the star of the parade, he also travels by sleigh through El Segundo streets throughout December, distributing candy canes to children. Lee explains, "Santa also opens up Candy Cane Lane on East Acacia Street, where all of the houses are decorated elaborately with lights and props. Hundreds of people walk through every year."

Along with the holiday sleigh bell noise there is also the all-familiar LAX air traffic noise. But the benefits of El Segundo living seem to outweigh such small irritations for most residents.

The next time you hear the buzz of a plane overhead or are passing through El Segundo to catch a flight, take a moment to salute this head-turning city in the South Bay. It's much more than just a corridor to LAX; it is a pioneering, culturally rich, vibrant and beautiful place that has commanded global attention for close to 100 years. Now we wait to see what the next century holds for this city on the rise.