

U.S.

Stadium Plan Revives Inglewood's Real Estate

City's redevelopment builds crosstown rivalry with downtown L.A.; Staples Center hosted fewer concerts after opening of Forum.



Crowd reactions at an event to introduce the Los Angeles Chargers in Inglewood, Calif., in January. The team has firmed up its plans to start playing at a newly built stadium in the city, starting 2019. PHOTO: KELVIN KUO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By **HANNAH KARP**

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INGLEWOOD, Calif.—As the San Diego Chargers make plans to become the second National Football League team to move to the Los Angeles area, this sleepy suburb has emerged as an unlikely prize among moguls battling for dominance in sports and entertainment.

As plans firm up for the Chargers and the Rams to start playing in 2019 at the \$2.7 billion, 70,000-seat City of Champions stadium to be built in Inglewood, the city of 109,000 residents is stealing downtown L.A.'s thunder, threatening the so-far unchallenged reign of the arts and sports district roughly 10 miles to the northeast.

Inglewood's development boom and rising real-estate prices are part of a reincarnation of a town once known more for violence and graft, especially after a former mayor pleaded guilty to a corruption charge in 2010 after a decade in power. According to the 1996 hit song "California Love" by the late rapper Tupac, featuring Dr. Dre, Inglewood was "always up to no good."

The proposed sports facility is driving up Inglewood's real-estate values. Beverly Hills real-estate agents have been sending representatives to sniff around for available properties for their clients, as construction gets under way on Southern California's biggest officially permitted real-estate project, with stores, offices, hotel rooms, residential space, restaurants, lakes, 25 acres of public park and a 6,000-seat performance venue slated to flank the field.

The Rams' billionaire owner, Stan Kroenke, isn't the only big shot with a stake in Inglewood. Music manager Irving Azoff, whose clients include the Eagles, and Madison Square Garden Co. Chief Executive James Dolan together reopened the historic Forum arena together next to the stadium site three years ago, kicking it off with six Eagles shows.

It quickly became one of the highest-grossing concert venues in the country, with \$52 million revenue in 2016, according to industry tracker Pollstar, and in the process helping convince the NFL that the long-ignored city of Inglewood could flourish.

While Mr. Kroenke had considered developing the Inglewood site before the Forum's rebirth, the arena's unexpected "success put away the talk that Inglewood isn't a place that people would come to," said Inglewood Mayor James Butts. Until the Forum's reopening, he added, the city had been "perceived as a dangerous, unsavory place."

Rams manager Kevin Demoff said his pitch to NFL owners in 2015 highlighted the Forum's success as a selling point for the Inglewood site.

"All parties understand the benefits that the two properties bring to one another," Mr. Demoff said.

This isn't Inglewood's first brush with glory. The "fabulous Forum," as it was known, was a magnet for L.A.'s glitterati decades ago when the venue was home to the National Basketball Association's Lakers, especially during the team's five-championship-winning streak in the 1980s known as its "Showtime" era. It also featured concerts by music's greatest legends, from Elvis Presley to Led Zeppelin.

But the surrounding neighborhood was never developed into an attraction in its own right, and faded from the spotlight after the Forum's then-owner, Anschutz Entertainment Group, built the Staples Center downtown and the Lakers moved there in 1999. AEG sold the Forum for \$22 million to a church group two years later.

Inglewood's new power brokers then began a tangled history with AEG's owner, billionaire Philip Anschutz, and his top brass, who spent the following decade turning the once-gritty zone surrounding the Staples Center into a commercial district known as L.A. Live, similar to what is now planned for Inglewood.

A series of botched attempts to forge partnerships that involved various combinations of AEG, Mr. Azoff and MSG also fed today's crosstown rivalry.

Tim Leiweke, who served as chief executive of AEG until he was pushed out in 2013 after—but not because of—an unsuccessful attempt to bring an NFL team to a proposed stadium downtown, is also now tied to Inglewood through his year-old joint venture with Mr. Azoff. The venture, a venue-management company called Oak View Group, counts the Forum among its clients.



The Staples Center held 32 concerts in 2016, fewer than the 37 held the year before, when Inglewood's Forum hadn't opened. PHOTO: SEAN M. HAFFEY/GETTY IMAGES

AEG, which owns and operates the Staples Center in downtown Los Angeles, doesn't expect the revitalization of Inglewood will put much of a dent in business at its L.A. Live campus, but company executives say the Forum is a worthy competitor to its Staples Center arena, which hosts 240 events a year.

"L.A. Live will continue to be a premier entertainment destination primarily because of its central location within L.A. and all of the investment and attributes that downtown LA offers," AEG said, noting that the busy commercial center draws "footfall in the millions" and has easy public transportation, about 500,000 jobs, an influx of young, high-income residents and \$14 billion in projects under construction.

Staples hosted 32 concerts in 2016, down from an average of 35 a year before the Forum reopened. But 2016 was still the second-most profitable year in the arena's history and

AEG's most profitable year, despite none of Staples' anchor sports teams making the playoffs. Forum hosted 69 concerts last year, its operators said.

A consultant for AEG's Mr. Anschutz has outlined terrorism-related security concerns stemming from constructing a stadium in Inglewood so close to Los Angeles International Airport. But Mayor Butts said in an interview that the report was absurd.

It is not all bad blood between the two camps.

AEG's Mr. Anschutz and the Rams' Mr. Kroenke, both of whom hail from Denver, are friends, according to a person familiar with the matter, and even share a similar taste in art.

In the Pepsi Center, where the Mr. Kroenke's Denver Nuggets play, he has hung replicas of several pieces in Mr. Anschutz's sizable collection of Western paintings.

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