

# Promenade builder can attract a crowd

**PROFILE:** *Millionaire gives up occupation as lawyer to develop shopping centers.*

**By Ann Griffith**  
*Staff writer*

Multimillionaire Rick Caruso picks at his salad and tries to figure out something that's been perplexing him for years: sidewalks.

Too narrow and it's hard for people to move. Too wide and the place looks deserted.

"People like it a little

crowded," he explained. "Cozy."

The successful developer, 40, opened The Promenade at Westlake shopping center in Thousand Oaks in 1996 and then decided it was too crowded. He made changes when he built The Commons at Calabasas in 1998, but there was too much space and it looked empty, even when the parking lot was full.

"If somebody will come to the center for no other reason than to hang out, then I know they will come back to shop because they feel comfortable," he said.



*Staff photo by K.C. Alfred*

**BUILDER:** Rick Caruso has left his mark in area.

His obsession with pleasant details makes his elaborate malls popular.

He and his analysts at Caruso Affiliated Holdings in Santa Monica will brainstorm later to get the perfect sidewalk formula for his two current projects.

He is also negotiating with Thousand Oaks to build restaurants, plazas and a science museum next to the Civic Arts Plaza. An agreement has not been signed.

He also is building a shopping district near the Farmers Market at Third and Fairfax in Los Angeles. When it is complete in 2001, it will be his largest project.

Caruso is talking about the complexities of sidewalks at the Marmalade Cafe in The Promenade. There's a silk handkerchief in the breast pocket of his charcoal suit. His wife, he says, thinks he dresses too conservatively.

He orders bottled water, but the restaurant is out of his brand and offers Pellegrino instead.

"Even better, it's Italian," he said.

While some people still build boxes to house giant stores, Caruso invests in brass and copper accents, elaborate fountains and cupolas. He builds quality centers because he also will be the landlord. Other developers sell their centers after they build.

He tries to create the center of town in communities searching for a soul.

Councilwoman Linda Parks calls him "Mr. Quality."

Caruso's life story reads like a movie plot, written just for the handsome developer.

As a teen-ager, he washed cars at Dollar Rent a Car. But his family wasn't poor. His father, Henry J. Caruso, founded the company after immigrating to the United States from Italy.

The elder Caruso made his son work, sending him to what is now called Harvard-Westlake School, a competitive school in Los Angeles, and then to USC, where Rick Caruso graduated with honors. Then he made his son study law.

Rick Caruso insists he didn't have

a choice in the matter. "He's Italian," he said.

Caruso signed his first real estate deal before he had graduated from Pepperdine School of Law at 24. He bought land near airports to lease to his father's business. He secured the bank loan with the promise of a reliable tenant, a formula he still uses today.

Caruso signs up retail companies like Starbucks Coffee and Bristol Farms specialty markets before he breaks ground on a project.

Instead of grocery stores with expensive baked treats and valet parking, he's decided regular supermarkets will work better as anchors to attract a larger crowd. It's another fine-tuning of his formula.

Caruso worked as a corporate attorney, but it wasn't his dream.

"I always envied the other side of the table," he said. "Cranking out paperwork until 2 a.m. isn't very exciting."

When the firm he worked for went bankrupt, he went home to his wife of one year, Tina, and told her he was unemployed.

It freed him to start a second career at age 26. He rented a one-room office and started with apartments. Ten years ago he built his first shopping center called Burton Place, just south of the Beverly Center on La Cienega Boulevard. Loehmann's is the only tenant.

Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky first met Caruso in the early 1980s, when Yaroslavsky was a councilman and Caruso worked on a shopping center in his district.

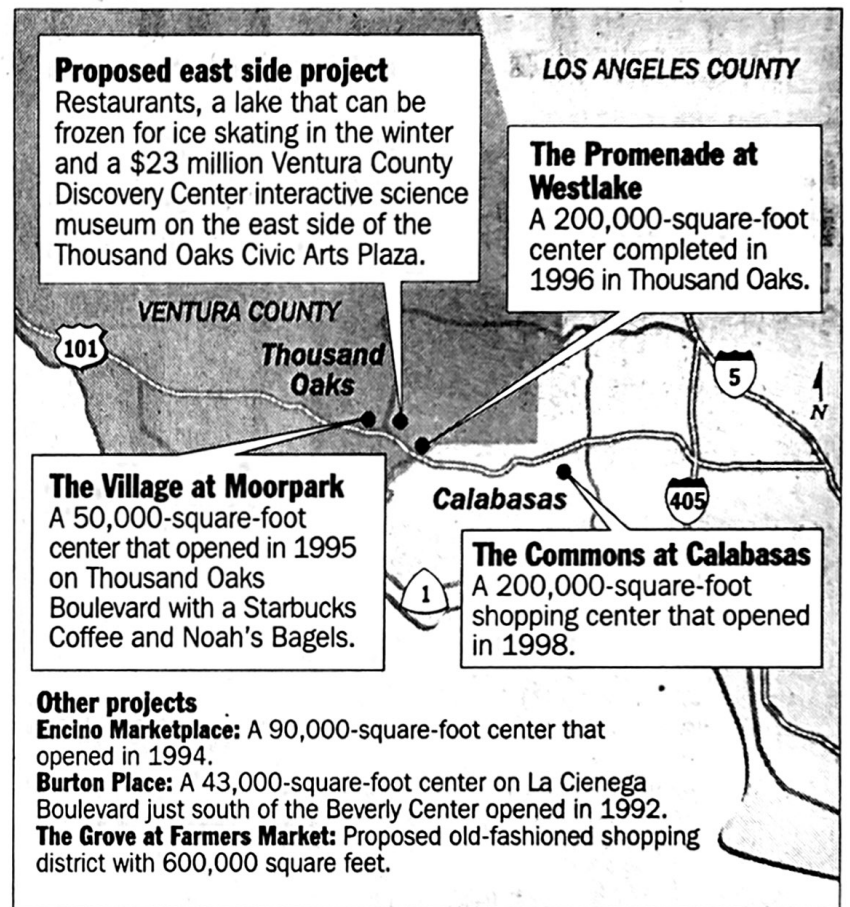
"Like a lot of young people starting out, he was ambitious and wanted to succeed, but he also had this capability to listen. He did that with me and just said yes to almost everything," Yaroslavsky said, "and I'm tough on developers."

**"**Like a lot of young people starting out, he was ambitious and wanted to succeed, but he also had this capability to listen."**"**

— Zev Yaroslavsky, L.A. County supervisor, about developer Rick Caruso

## Past and future projects

Shopping center developer Rick Caruso has made a mark in Ventura County, building innovative centers such as The Promenade and The Commons, and proposes to build a science center in Thousand Oaks.



Staff graphic by Wendy Noda

Caruso's trademark is bending and compromising to fit a community, as he did in Yaroslavsky's district. He did it in Thousand Oaks too.

Residents of the wealthy North Ranch neighborhood told him what they wanted and Caruso made changes to his design, even though it cost him.

The Promenade was built for \$40 million. The city, by comparison, built its new Civic Arts Plaza for \$64 million. Caruso won't disclose his wealth, but, he said, he makes more than 12 percent profit a year on his centers.

"If you give people what they want, they'll use it," he said.

In the end, they rallied the City Council to approve The Promenade.

Caruso is a powerful man in Los Angeles. He is in his second term as president of the Los Angeles City Water and Power Commission, overseeing the largest public utility in the country.

He also lectures around the country and has received awards for his designs and charity.

All of his jobs make for long days.

He has dinner with his family at his home near Santa Monica and then reads and faxes from a home office, sometimes until 2 a.m.

He gets up in the morning by 7 to drive his three young boys to school and preschool in his black Range Rover. He and his wife are expecting a daughter.

"The family is No. 1," he said.

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