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For more than a decade, Ken Bernstein has been the go-to guy when residents and activists want to save historic buildings in Los Angeles from the wrecking ball.

As the longtime director of preservation at the L.A. Conservancy, he helped push the city to preserve Chase Knolls, the Sherman Oaks 1950s garden apartment complex. He advised Tujunga residents on how to save a quirky castle and pushed the school district to restore rather than demolish the Ambassador Hotel. Now he's on the inside.

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Bernstein is considered an ideal person to lead the new endeavor. A Woodland Hills native, he was a planning deputy for former West Valley Councilwoman Laura Chick before joining the conservancy. So he already knows the bureaucratic maze and politics of city planning.

Having worked on high-profile campaigns, he also is used to the drama and tension that often surround historic preservation, especially now.

Los Angeles County's population is forecast to remain one of the nation's fastest-growing, and with little open land left, developers are looking to replace older buildings with taller and denser construction.

While the city of Los Angeles has one of the oldest preservation ordinances in the nation, L.A. has barely surveyed or kept track of its historic gems; that has led to bitter, last-minute battles between preservationists and developers.

The Office of Historic Resources should lessen that conflict.

"When you start to accommodate growth, it's really important you look at and try to retain the special character of the neighborhood," said Gail Goldberg, director of the city Planning Department.

"The surveys we're doing are absolutely critical, not just to help us understand where we have resources we must be careful of, but also to tell us where development can occur without going through all the hoops."

L.A. city government has rarely had more than one full-time employee dedicated to historic preservation. In contrast, 59 people staff New York City's landmarks commission.

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L.A. is about 460 square miles, including more than 800,000 parcels. But only 15 percent of the city has been surveyed for its preservation value, with no studies in large swaths of the San Fernando Valley and south, east and west L.A.

Earlier this year, one of the city's first Jewish community centers - an architecturally significant modern building and a stop on the Jewish heritage tour - was demolished in Boyle Heights before anyone could try to save it.

"You can't begin to protect historic sites if you don't even know what you have," Bernstein said. "We hope it will prevent these kinds of 'We didn't know what we lost' (incidents)."

Others would like the survey and the new Office of Historic Resources to put an end to bitter battles between neighbors and developers. Often, neighbors and preservationists try to get a building designated as historic just when the owner plans to demolish it.

Land-use attorney Ben Reznik said city government must develop a system that is fair to developers and property owners, that reduces confrontation and that limits the ability to use preservation as a way to stop new development.

"We can't say every building 50 years old or more is a candidate. They should now home in on criteria for designation so people can buy and invest in 50-year-old office and apartment buildings and not be afraid."

Preservationists agree the current system has its problems.

Susan Jagiello with the Chase Knolls Residents and Neighbors Association said city officials have been unequipped to help residents protect unique and valuable sites.

When developers planned to bulldoze her complex, she and her neighbors had to quickly prove that their 14-acre garden-style complex was special enough to preserve.

"Nobody was aware of it, and when it was sold, nobody mentioned the word 'historic.' If there had been some kind of comprehensive list through the Planning Department, where a developer or real estate agent could have checked before they bought the property, it could have prevented a real brawl." Bernstein's guidance was instrumental in saving Chase Knolls, Jagiello said.

"We need someone like Ken in this city," she said. "This can only be good for neighborhoods like ours."

Councilman Ed Reyes heads the City Council's Planning and Land Use Committee and has the most historic neighborhoods in his district. Reyes said he has high expectations for Bernstein.

"Ken has to send a message that we are not a judge and jury," Reyes said. "We are here to be more efficient about preserving historic structures while protecting communities."