Bridges meant to enhance I-15 area

Two landscaped bridges, sprawling over portions of an entrenched Interstate 15 in City Heights, are intended to enhance a neighborhood that will be split down the middle by the new freeway segment.

The massive bridges, endorsed by the San Diego City Council on Monday, will support landscaping and small buildings for commercial, office or public use, said San Diego City Councilman John Hartley, sponsor of the measure.

Hartley's plan is a compromise from the so-called Visions plan for the I-15 corridor, which was rejected by the council in April.

The council's new plan calls on the California Department of Transportation to build a 140-foot-wide concrete deck on the south side of the planned University Avenue freeway overpass and a 50-foot-wide concrete deck on its north side.

The plan would also add a 50-foot-wide deck on the north side of the planned El Cajon Boulevard overpass, and would spruce up the overpass with wide sidewalks.

The Visions plan, which was expected to cost at least $60 million, would have covered several blocks of the below-grade freeway with a concrete platform that supported a park, community center and retail complex on top.

Caltrans is still committed to providing one block of freeway cover between Orange and Polk avenues.

The freeway segment, south of Interstate 8 across El Cajon Boulevard and beyond Landis Street, has been planned for more than 30 years and is now proposed to be finished in 1998. Hartley expects the widened overpasses on University and El Cajon to be finished a year later.

"All this will be completed by 1999," Hartley said. "It will not only have the decks, it will probably have the widest bridges in the county and in the state. It will be really a springboard for City Heights. And, at the same time, there will be no delay in the freeway project."

Hartley said he would be holding a series of community meetings through next November to help determine what to build on the proposed bridge decks.

However, funding plans for the project still remain incomplete. The council's tentative plan would use $5 million from a federal highway improvement grant, $1 million from Caltrans, and $2.4 million from the City Heights Redevelopment Project. If the Caltrans
contribution is not approved by the California Transportation Commission when it is considered in the next few months, city officials said the money might be generated from the redevelopment project.

Supporters of the Visions project said it would help revitalize the community with open space and a future town center. Opponents argued that Visions was too elaborate and would only have caused further delays in the freeway extension that had been planned since the late-1950s.

Hartley described his compromise plan as something that has encouraged most of the City Heights community to work together again.