A basic exercise in democracy will take place in the cafeteria of Hoover High School Saturday morning: citizens will attempt to chart their own course. This is called self-determination. Or, in drier words, planning.

Mid-City has had two previous community plans formulated, in 1965 and 1984. The city of San Diego wrote both.

This time out, the folks who live in the neighborhoods that comprise Mid-City are penning what ought -- and ought not -- to take place around them. They are developing a blueprint for the area.

From 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., any resident who cares to show up will sit at lunch tables with representatives of the local planning groups and pore over maps and lists.

Any distinction between the two categories will be slight. Members of the planning groups are ordinary citizens elected from the communities they represent.

"So these are our own neighbors and friends," explained Michael Sprague, president of the City Heights town council.

Beginning in the '60s, throughout the '70s and into the '80s, build-to-the-max was the philosophy that ruled much of Mid-City, an area of 134,000 people that includes the neighborhoods of Normal Heights, Kensington, Talmadge, City Heights, El Cerrito, Rolando, Rolando Park, Darnall, Oak Park, Webster and Gateway.

In City Heights, in particular, single-family houses were torn down and up went apartment buildings, often unsightly and substandard, with slabs of concrete across the fronts for parking.

As a result, City Heights today has approximately 75,000 people living on about 3,000 acres, according to planning documents. Eighty to 90 percent of the residents are renters.

Galvanized by the crowding and its attendant blight, residents formed "a group on almost every corner, saying, 'This can't go on. We've had enough,'" said Gary Weber, a professional planner and member of the Normal Heights Planning Committee.

But not until the early 1990s did San Diego authorize community planning committees in Mid-City neighborhoods, according to John Wilhoit, a city senior planner.

"We were about the last area allowed by the city to have planning groups," said
Sprague, of the City Heights town council. "Finally, we did get them, so we cherish them."

In other words, what is happening in these older neighborhoods could be likened to Newton's third law in physics, that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, and the city of San Diego has itself to account for the passion and volubility of Mid-City citizen planners.

"This part of town has gone from very little resident activity in 1980 to now probably more than the city can handle," said Weber.

On its own, San Diego eventually would have updated its 1984 plan for the area. But years might have passed by then. "Very honestly," said Sprague, "we were far back in the line."

Meanwhile, aging schools and water pipes in the area were figuratively and literally bursting at the seams. Library branches were too small and cramped for the population they served, and certain lower-income neighborhoods were afflicted by a variety of social ills, including gang and drug activity.

Mid-City decided to do its own update. The citizens applied for and, with the help of City Council members, received money that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development makes available for community improvement.

In the end, area residents contracted for city planners to work with and for them. "We are paying for a major portion of their time," Sprague explained. "The city is also contributing."

He estimated the cost of the update at more than $100,000.

The process began with business improvement groups and planning committees reviewing the previous blueprint for the area. Sprague said, "We went through the old plan item by item and said, 'Did this happen?' and, if not, 'Is it something we want to happen?'"

Though the Mid-City comprises both affluent neighborhoods and very poor ones, he added, consensus was easily reached. "Our concerns were the same."

Periodically, the committees have set up workshops, like the one this Saturday, for other residents to take a look at and critique what has been put down on paper so far.

Saturday's gathering will be the third annual workshop for the community at large.

A goal of the new plan is to "identify what it would take to make this community the way it needs to be," said Weber, who is donating his time as a professional planner to the effort.
Mid-City's approach is "bottom-up planning," he said. "It's the best way, to find out what people want. So when we sit in our committees, it's not like just 20 people talking to each other.

"The people that live it day in and day out, they're the geniuses. They know the answers."

Schools, he said, consistently raise the greatest passion in the Mid-City.

But schools are only the beginning. The list of Mid-City needs is long, much of it stemming from crowding. But, said Weber, "You can't go back and take out 1,000 apartment buildings."

So citizens lay their plans, given the circumstances. They deal, he said, with traffic and zoning, land use, facilities -- much of which, he conceded, seems "very dry."

But the impact of these dry planners' tools, when applied to real life, can be dramatic. Consider land use. Mid-City has far more concrete and asphalt than green open space.

So, Weber said, "There's no sense in going out and dragging kids into Little League. There's no place to play. I've stood at Little League games and seen a little kid hanging on a chain-link fence and saying, 'How can I play?' And someone tells him, 'Well, your mom should have registered you two months ago (because there's a waiting list).'

In the last 10 years or so, he said, elected officials representing Mid-City have been "people who sincerely care about and are in touch with the community, trying their darnedest to solve problems."

But as in all health matters, a cure is harder to come by than prevention would have been. "I don't know how you solve poverty," Weber said. "I don't know how you redo an area of 70,000 overnight."

It would take, he guessed, at least a quarter of a billion dollars. "There's not that kind of money," he said.

But the citizen planners remain optimistic. They hope to spot opportunities for public-private partnerships. They speculate that perhaps, down the road, the communities could themselves finance some portion of what is needed.

And they are heartened by the success of the $65 million Urban Village project, a City Heights complex already under way, consisting of a new branch library, community center, swimming pool, recreation center, police substation and stores.

Two new schools, opening this fall, have been built at opposite ends of the project site.
Urban Village is the work of CityLink Investment Corp., a San Diego-based firm focused on urban renewal. Local retailer Sol Price provided the start-up money for CityLink. He also donated $5 million for the new library and community center.

Former San Diego City Councilman William Jones is CityLink's head.

Weber said the new buildings and green space rising in the crowded heart of the Mid-City show what can happen with the beneficence of a Sol Price and the determination of a William Jones.