Residents strive to be above it all: Concrete deck may cap section of I-15 extension in City Heights

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Everyone in City Heights knows the freeway's coming through. They can't stop it. They can't go around it.

But they can build over it.

Ever since the state announced plans to extend Interstate 15 through City Heights, local officials and residents have asked for a concrete deck to cover the new highway that will cut through the 40th Street corridor.

Plans now call for two blocks of covering to reduce pollution and provide a platform for parks or small projects. Each block of deck would support three feet of dirt or a three-story building.

But these two blocks will span less than a quarter of the 2.2-mile, 25-foot deep chasm that could divide City Heights. And some think this neighborhood, already struggling with crime, drugs, gangs and graffiti, deserves more.

"The community did not ask for this freeway. It was forced upon us," said Frank Gormlie, a member of the neighborhood group that aims to redevelop City Heights. "We've accepted it, but we want development on top to reverse the negative effects it will bring."

The California Transportation Department will begin construction as early as next year.

The freeway extension will solve regional traffic problems, said City Councilman John Hartley, while giving City Heights only "another big ditch." Covering it and building over the top, on the other hand, could "stop that downward spiral and try to get it going up," Hartley said.

The City Heights Community Development Corp., a neighborhood and redevelopment organization, has received a $169,000 block grant to study the feasibility of completely covering the project. Officials say a complete eight-block cover would cost $90 million to $108 million but could be an economic and community asset.

Instead of dividing City Heights, a covered freeway could knit it together, making room for stores, parks, housing and other needs, the development corporation says. It has hired consultants from freeway and development projects around the country to determine what the residents want and how they can get it.
Nearly 200 City Heights residents crowded a community meeting at Wilson Elementary School Jan. 26 to share ideas about the neighborhood's character and needs. The consultants will return for another meeting March 9 with different proposals for the community to choose.

Consultants at the Jan. 26 meeting showed slides of covered freeway projects in Phoenix, Boston, and Seattle, and community leaders led a question-and-answer session on the freeway project. Then the residents gathered into groups, marking maps of City Heights with landmarks, heavy traffic areas, amenities, and problem spots.

"Where's the most traffic on El Cajon Boulevard?" group leaders asked. "Where do you walk? Where do kids play Frisbee?"

Residents praised the friendly, multicultural City Heights community but wrote a long list of what it lacks, including parks, schools, playgrounds, police stations, retail centers and residential housing.

Daily life is "pretty hairy-scary," said Phyllis Holtgrave, a 41st Street resident.

"We're underdeveloped, underemployed, and neglected. All the problems associated with inner cities are here," Gormlie said.

The difference in City Heights, Gormlie said, is that a lot of people are working for improvements. Though more than 65 percent of the residents are renters, the neighborhood has a history of strong community involvement.

For example, when arsonists and vandals invaded abandoned houses along the planned freeway route last year, the neighborhood leaders convinced the California Department of Transportation to speed up its demolition schedule.

Gormlie is organizing a community garden to brighten the bleak stretch of land left after the houses were torn down. The garden will only last until the freeway comes through, but residents still have rented over half of the 120 garden plots.

Small-scale efforts such as the garden, the volunteer graffiti paint-outs and neighborhood watch patrols are one thing. Having an impact on a major government project is another.

The community has tried to contribute to the freeway plans for years, said Jim Bliesner, a director of the community development corporation. They were largely ignored, he said, until councilman Hartley was elected in 1989. Hartley has consistently supported the community projects and encouraged their involvement, he said.

Even with support, a significantly changed freeway plan is an intimidating prospect. "It may seem like an enormous task," said Steve Cecil of Childs Bertman Tseckares & Casendino Inc., the project's Boston-based design consultants. "These are very
expensive and complicated undertakings. A clear message needs to be stated, a really strong case made that other things could occur."

Ken Stone, a Boston community activist, told how residents changed a highway plan there.

"Folks like you were involved and came out and said 'This is what we want, and this is how we want it done,'" he said. "Everything that we wanted, where they said no, we said yes. And everything we ever wanted we got. And you can win."

The community is entitled to some compensation for the disruption the freeway will cause, Stone said. "Seems to me what they're asking the community to give up is a lot," he said. "What are they willing to give back?"

Some residents are skeptical that a decking project is the cure for the community's ills. "The cost of covering that freeway could probably rebuild much of City Heights, " said Landis Street homeowner Mark Jolles. Besides, funding and building a cover would take too long, he said.

"By the time this is done, it could be the year 2010, and I'm not just making that up," he said.

The community should focus on projects such as making public transit a part of the freeway plan, Jolles said, which could also direct redevelopment and revitalize the area.

Even for supporters of the freeway deck, the biggest problem is how to pay for it.

The state agreed to finance the block of cover between Polk and Orange avenues. The city of San Diego agreed to finance the block between Landis and Wightman streets.

Private developers cannot be expected to pay for the freeway decking, Bleisner said, and additional subsidies are needed to build the extra cover.

Bleisner is working to designate the freeway as part of the interstate system. Under the Federal Highway Demonstration Bill, that would make it eligible for federal funds to deck the rest.

In fact, the development corporation's Gormlie said "it's almost unethical" that the federal government overlooked the City Heights link of the interstate.

City Heights councilman John Hartley said a combination of state and federal subsidies, redevelopment funds and bonds financed by economic projects could finance a cover. Redevelopment funds alone should not finance the cover, he said.

"People in that area don't need a freeway," Hartley said. "It's a regional problem. It
shouldn't be on the back of that neighborhood."

Bleisner urged City Heights residents to think beyond the "little postage stamp" that is currently planned to cover the freeway.

"Don't short change yourself when you create a vision, because if you only ask for a nickel, you get a nickel."

Denn is an intern for The San Diego Union.

Caption: 3 PICS
1. Nearly 200 City Heights residents turned out for a recent meeting to share ideas about life with the new freeway. 2. City Councilman John Hartley, left, and several City Heights activists, Jim Bliesner, Barry Schutz, Ken Stone, Ted Odmark and Rebecca Barnes, are trying to minimize the disruption when the new freeway comes through. 3. City Heights activist Jim Bliesner says elected officials only recently began listening to neighborhood ideas about how to deal with the new link of Interstate 15. (F-51) 1. The San Diego Union/James Skovmand 2,3. The San Diego Union/Barry Fitzsimmons

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