Village hailed as 'smart growth'; City Heights project set to break ground

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Hailed as "a perfect example of smart growth," the City Heights Metro Center -- a $47 million redevelopment project -- will provide affordable housing, job training and day-care facilities, all within yards of one of the city's busiest public transit corridors.

The project, which takes up an entire city block between 39th and 40th streets and University and Polk avenues, is scheduled to be completed in early 2004.

Funding from a combination of city redevelopment and housing funds, tax credits and private investment is in place, and the official groundbreaking is today.

"To put housing and jobs together in a community that could use both, it's just a very exciting project," said Elizabeth Morris, CEO of the San Diego Housing Commission. "I think we will see more projects of this type in the future, it's kind of where the City of Villages is steering us."

The housing portion of the project, called Metro Villas, will include 120 affordable housing units for very-low-income renters, and it will include three- and four-bedroom units for larger families. Also included will be two playground areas and a community center.

The $26 million Metro Villas is a joint project between the city of San Diego and two private, nonprofit developers -- the City Heights Community Development Corp. and San Diego Interfaith Housing.

At the same time those agencies were looking for a way to provide affordable housing, Price Charities -- the same foundation that already has revitalized large portions of City Heights -- was looking for a way to bring job training into the area.

Price Charities combined forces with the San Diego Workforce Partnership to relocate its Kearny Mesa career center to midcity. The 82,700-square-foot Metro Career Center will be the flagship of the Workforce Partnerships' six centers.

The Work Force Partnership, which administers federal and state job training funds for the city and county, offers job training skills for unemployed and laid-off workers and assists with such things as resume writing, computer training, job searching, internships and youth programs.

President and CEO Larry Fitch said more than 30,000 people a year come through the centers; he estimates about 7,000 per year will be assisted at the new site.
"Midcity unfortunately has one of the lowest medium incomes in all of San Diego," said Matthew Hervey of Price Charities. "This will be an important anchor for this neighborhood to try and provide education and job training to help individuals improve their lives."

A child care center, to be operated by Neighborhood House for up to 85 children, will offer full service child care as well as free or low-cost drop-off child care services. If people has job interviews to go to, or need to attend classes at the center, they will have a place to leave their children.

Jim LoBue, redevelopment coordinator with the city, says the project is a perfect example of smart-growth development.

"It's a pretty dense project, we've packed a lot of good things into one city block," LoBue said. "It follows many of the principles of smart growth, the way it integrates so well with the neighborhood, schools, parks and transportation."

The project also includes a 489-space parking garage that will be shared by the Career Center and Metro Villas tenants.