The human costs: Building program exacts emotional toll on residents displaced by construction

San Diego Union-Tribune - Sunday, August 3, 2003
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More than 3,000 San Diego residents must give up their homes, pack up their memories and search for new places to live to make way for many of the schools promised under Proposition MM.

And the timing couldn't be worse. They are thrown into a housing search in the midst of an explosion in real estate values and an escalation in rents.

How these residents are compensated, where they go and how they get there are some of the most emotional consequences of Proposition MM, the $1.5 billion school construction bond measure approved by voters in 1998.

Of the 16 schools to be built or rebuilt by the San Diego Unified School District, at least nine require relocating people -- from as few as 18 for Burbank Elementary, which will be rebuilt in Barrio Logan, to as many as 809 for Herbert Ibarra Elementary School, which will be built in City Heights.

That means buying hundreds of houses and apartment units and forcing families to move. While some renters have used their relocation payments to buy their first homes, some property owners have lost homes their families have lived in for generations.

"For some people, it's like winning the lottery. For others, it is incredibly disruptive," said Michael Sprague, president of the town council in City Heights, a community that will get four of the new schools but see more than 2,300 people displaced. "We desperately need these schools, but it's tough for the people who live within the chosen site."

Proposition MM promised 13 new schools to relieve crowding at more than two dozen elementary schools in the San Diego Unified School District. Five of the schools are scheduled to open in fall 2005 with most of the rest opening in 2006.

The district plans to build the schools in the neighborhoods they will serve -- many of which are among the most densely populated areas of the city. Vacant land is scarce, so the district must exercise its right under state law to take the property it needs.

"You hear all these sad stories about people who don't want to move," said Bob Kiesling, director of acquisition for San Diego city schools. "We'd love not to take people's property, but it's a neighborhood school and it has to go in the neighborhood."

Tom Lovell was born and raised on Van Dyke Avenue in City Heights, where his family
has owned three homes on the same lot since 1957. When his parents died, Lovell took responsibility for the property.

He never imagined he'd lose his family's home, and he had big plans to renovate it the way his father had always dreamed. Now, to make way for Florence Griffith Joyner Elementary, he can take little but memories with him. He dug up his mother's rose bushes and took clippings from her geraniums. But things like the little backyard pet cemetery, where he buried the birds, turtles, kittens and dogs that filled his childhood, will be left behind.

"I've gone through the whole emotional process of being angry, feeling cheated," Lovell said. "I went through the roof when I first got the letter from the school district two years ago."

To assist residents who must move, the district hired two relocation companies. The consultants meet individually with residents to assess their needs. They survey available homes and rentals in the area. In fact, they do everything from allaying fears to finding homes that will allow pit bulls.

Initial reports from those consultants indicate that almost 75 percent of households who must move are low-income, and almost half speak a language other than English at home. The ethnic background of the households affected are 48 percent Hispanic, 20 percent white, 19 percent African-American, 8 percent Asian and 5 percent another race or ethnicity.

The district pays the consultants $3,200 per relocation case and additional fees for special services. The district expects to pay the consultants a total of $4.9 million.

The consultants determine relocation benefits, which must be approved by the Board of Education. For homeowners, the district pays all associated expenses -- closing and moving costs, even updating properties for disabled access if necessary. And because real estate prices in San Diego can rise very quickly, homeowners are entitled to a "purchase price differential." If a comparable house in the same neighborhood cannot be bought for the price the district paid for the original house, the district will pay the homeowner the difference.

"In this high, fast-moving market, it has become a major problem for us," Kiesling said. In fact, while the district had planned to spend $2 million an acre to acquire each site and relocate residents, some sites will now cost as much as $4 million an acre. "Prices are escalating so fast. The appraisals typically lag a fast-moving market, so by the time they get ready to find another house, the whole neighborhood goes up in value."

By law, the district must relocate renters to "decent, safe and sanitary" comparable replacement property. If the rent is higher, the renter gets a lump-sum payment meant to cover the difference for 42 months.
Renters may choose to apply the lump sum toward a down payment on a home. So far, 25 have done so.

Samnieng Chhuon always dreamed of owning her own home. Her family escaped communism and famine in Cambodia in 1981, when she was 13, and they came to the United States, settling in City Heights.

She had lived in the same two-bedroom apartment since 1984. Her husband, mother and two children lived with her, and they paid $690 a month in rent. When the school district said they had to move, she was shocked by the high rents. After looking at three-bedroom apartments that rented for $1,500 a month, she figured a mortgage might be better.

So the Chhuons took their relocation payment, as well as financial assistance from Community Housing Works, a nonprofit first-time home-buyers organization, and bought a two-story, 1,700-square-foot home with a big yard in Fallbrook for $265,000. Their mortgage payment is $1,700.

"I am so glad, so glad," Chhuon said. "My kids are happy. They have their own room. I have my own room. I never have my own room before."

But for many, the reality of moving is much more difficult. Some families live in crowded, unsafe conditions and, by law, must be accommodated with a better situation. Others have such low rent that finding an affordable place seems impossible.

Nevertheless, for the two sites where the relocation process is complete, everyone found a comparable place to live, Kiesling said.

As families moved out and the homes were boarded up, fenced off and prepared for demolition, there were months when the sites were in transition.

In City Heights, where the Herbert Ibarra school will be built, looters stole refrigerators, sinks and lighting fixtures from vacant apartment buildings. Gangs tagged almost every inch of standing wall space. The homeless set up camp, and residents found evidence of drug use.

The district knows it is liable for the safety of those left behind, just as any landlord would be. It provides 24-hour security at some sites. For the last residents to leave a site, though, the experience can be frightening.

Naomy Sosa, 16, and her family moved from their City Heights home on the Herbert Ibarra school site in mid-April. While they were still there, their house on 49th Street, once clean and tidy, became covered in graffiti. Some of the windows were broken, and nearby demolition activity stirred up roaches and rats. In the last week they lived there,
someone set fire to the empty house next door.

The five members of the Sosa family lived this way for months, though eventually they landed a nice three-bedroom in an apartment complex about a mile away.

The entire process -- from choosing a site to buying property to relocating residents -- has been completed only at the Cherokee Point and Ibarra sites in City Heights. The district spent $12.6 million to purchase property for Cherokee Point and expects to spend $2.4 million to relocate residents when all expenses are submitted. At Ibarra, the district spent $23.5 million on property and expects to spend $4.1 million to relocate residents.

Although many people are unhappy about moving, most of the property owners have agreed to sell to the district. So far, the district has resorted to condemnation for 29 properties over compensation disputes or title issues. All but five cases have been resolved.

The concern for some is not so much compensation as where all these displaced people will go, especially since the district has said it will make "every reasonable effort" to accommodate anyone who wants to stay in their community. Of the 119 households with renters at the Cherokee Point site, 48 were relocated within City Heights, said Sue Lawrence, real estate specialist for the schools. Of the 13 homeowners, three bought replacement homes in the City Heights area.

But an even greater issue, many say, is the loss of affordable housing.

"It has a measurable impact on the housing market in San Diego, taking all these apartments," said William Best, who owned an 18-unit complex in Normal Heights that will soon be demolished. "Nobody is building $700-a-month apartments. What gets rebuilt are $1,500 apartments."

Best, who charged $600 to $800 a month for rent, said he thinks lower-income residents and apartment dwellers -- "the voiceless and vulnerable" -- are being unfairly targeted.

Officials with the district say they do not target apartment dwellers, noting that the school construction sites are in the inner city, which has a higher number of apartments. The district chose the neighborhoods based on enrollment needs, but officials say the final site selection was left to the communities.

"We ask local planning groups to help find a site. Each has its own thinking about where the school should go," Kiesling said. "We don't try to dictate to the community what criteria they should use."

Risa Baron, chairwoman of the Normal Heights Planning Committee, said that when the district decided to shrink the school site in its neighborhood, the committee chose to save 10 single-family homes rather than apartments.
"We took direction from the people living there," Baron said. "Those homeowners showed up to the meetings. They were vocal."

Kathy Przekopp loves the piano keys inlaid around her bathroom door. And the fence her father built around her yard. She spent three years worrying she would have to say goodbye to all of it.

But in December, she learned her home on 38th Street was one of the ones spared. "It was like I got a reprieve. I can belong here again."

That was almost three years after she learned her house was in jeopardy.

"It has been a very, very difficult process for me. It brings tears to my eyes," she said. "I know they are not trying to tear my heart out, but this is my longest relationship -- with my house. I know it's weird, but it's my safety net. I have bag-lady fears, like many women in this world, and I'm not interested in experiencing those fears."

But a few residents were willing to sacrifice their homes to improve their neighborhoods.

For 13 years, Mark Wolover has delivered mail in Normal Heights. He has come to know all the neighbors along his route and has watched, over the years, as the area slowly became affected by crime and drugs.

"The neighborhood is changing. That's where this whole thing really weighs on me," Wolover said. "It would improve the area a lot. Even though it's scary, it's a very positive thing for the community."

Wolover doesn't just deliver mail in the area; he lives there, too. And his home, a charming little 700-square-footer on the corner of 38th Street and Ward Road, will soon be demolished.

"I voted for Proposition MM," Wolover said. "And I would still have voted for it, even if I knew they were going to take my house. It'll all work out in the long run."

Moving costs

$276 million

Estimated cost the San Diego Unified School District will spend to acquire property, relocate residents and clear sites

for construction
3,110
Residents to be relocated

$29.5 million
Estimated cost to relocate residents

754
Housing units district has committed to purchase so far

Caption: 4 PICS 1 CHART
1. Luis Aguayo, 12, (across street) biked on Gloria Street, where Lincoln High School will be rebuilt. Luis has to move so the school can expand, but on the east side, Ana Kiya (left), 6, Cherry Sovann, 15, Natalya Goban, 4, Patience Goban, 11, and Kye Goban, 6, do not. The San Diego Unified School District will relocate more than 3,000 residents to make way for schools funded by Proposition MM. 2. Alejandro Sanchez shoveled away portions of an apartment on 49th Street in City Heights, where Herbert Ibarra Elementary School will be built. 3. Moving costs 4. The design task force for a Normal Heights elementary school looked over possibilities for the school. Kathy Przekopp (seated third from left) learned she could keep her home when the district decided to use a smaller site. (A-9) 5. The families of Margarita Contreras (left), 11, and Rosalva Sosa, 13, were among the last to leave the site in City Heights that will become Herbert Ibarra Elementary School, which is scheduled to open in fall 2005. Taggers covered the remaining homes with graffiti while some residents were still living in them. (A-9) 1,2,4,5. Laura Embry / Union-Tribune photos
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Edition: 1,3
Section: NEWS
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Index Terms: COST ; ELECTIONS ; HOUSING ; RELOCATION ; SAN DIEGO ; SCHOOLS ; SERIES.
Record Number: UTS1751828
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Full-text obtained via NewsBank