City Heights project loses steam; Model School advocates vow to find ways to revitalize area

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Author: Helen Gao

An ambitious redevelopment project in City Heights, which would have wiped out a few hundred homes and businesses, has been all but abandoned after four years of planning and community meetings.

The so-called Model School Project, announced with fanfare in 2002 by city and school officials, was to feature an elementary school, apartments, townhomes, a community clinic, child-care center, canyon parkland and commercial space.

The goal was to revitalize a neighborhood off Fairmount Avenue and 43rd Street, while replacing scores of homes razed by the San Diego Unified School District to build schools. The Model School Project, with an affordable housing component, was initially proposed for 30 acres before being scaled back to about 10.

But all that stands today is a partially built Florence Griffith Joyner Elementary School set to open in September 2007, one year behind schedule.

The joint powers agency created by the city, its Redevelopment Agency and Housing Authority and the school district voted to disband in July.

Many homeowners whose properties fell within the project's boundaries opposed the development. The project also did not pencil out economically because it would require tens of millions of dollars in public subsidy.

"You look at what you are trying to achieve and the critical mass of the properties, it just wasn't getting any momentum and traction," said Jim Waring, the city's deputy chief operating officer for land use and economic development.

The joint powers agency estimated it has spent about $1 million on administrative costs, planning, environmental and feasibility studies. Dozens of community meetings were held and thousands of letters sent to area property owners.

Jody Carey, whose home was threatened by eminent domain and who served on the Model School Development Agency board as a community representative, said he pushed for the agency's dissolution.

In 2004, he and his partner purchased what he called a "crack home" at the edge of a canyon within the project's boundaries. They bought the home for $260,000, stripped it down and spent $200,000 to rebuild it, only to learn later that it could be condemned along with 187 others nearby.
"The neighborhood feels completely relieved," said Carey about the disbanding of the joint powers agency.

The Model School Development Agency had the power of eminent domain, even though its board members were not elected officials.

That's because the state Legislature passed a law in 2002 to make it possible for the agency to take private property for redevelopment. Carey said that meant citizens could not hold their elected officials accountable for the project.

Although the project has been scrapped, economic revitalization can be seen throughout City Heights, a mid-city neighborhood known for its diverse cultures brought by refugees and immigrants from all over the world.

In recent years, a growing number of City Heights property owners have invested in the upkeep and renovation of their homes. Freshly painted and stuccoed homes are seen here and there, standing out among a landscape once predominated by dilapidation.

Just off University and Fairmount avenues, the City Heights Urban Village, completed in 2001, features a shopping center, library, police station, pool, elementary school, ball fields, town homes and other amenities.

That development won wide acclaim. In contrast, the Model School Project stumbled.

William Jones, president, CEO and owner of the CityLink Investment Corp., which developed the City Heights Urban Village, said when he got involved with the Model School Project, there was a lot of "resentment, anger and misunderstanding."

A study by his firm concluded the project in its original configuration would need $50 million to $60 million in subsidies. A pared down version would still need $30 million in public money.

Conceptual plans called for several hundred rental and for-sale housing units that would be both market rate and affordable.

Plans envisioned restoring the trash-strewn Manzanita Canyon near Joyner Elementary, turning the canyon into parkland with trails.

Surrounding streets would also be improved to provide safe pedestrian paths for students. Besides Joyner, Monroe Clark Middle School and Rosa Parks and Hamilton elementary schools are in the area.

Jones said he would continue to work on projects to improve City Heights but stressed, "Let's not go down a path that might raise expectations inappropriately."
The nonprofit City Heights Community Development Corp., which submitted a proposal to develop a portion of the Model School Project, said it hasn't given up either.

It plans to explore options with the city's new director of planning and community investment, William Anderson.

The City Heights agency owns land east of Joyner Elementary between 43rd Street and Fairmount Avenue, where it hopes to build housing, a child-care center and commercial space.

The project would require financial help from the city, said Jay Powell, executive director of the City Heights agency. The agency also plans to secure financing with tax credits, which offer investors tax breaks in exchange for investment in blighted neighborhoods.

But enormous financial challenges lie ahead. Since the housing market has cooled down, more and more developers are putting their projects on hold or are selling their property before construction. Building materials and land costs remain high.

Susan Tinsky, program manager for the Model School Project, said although the project as originally envisioned would not happen, she believes the concept remains relevant in the urban core where land is scarce.

It demonstrated an approach integrating a school with housing and other public amenities.

In the past, it was not common for school districts and city governments to collaborate on neighborhood redevelopment. The Model School Project brought the two sides together.

"The whole entire project is to challenge the standards we live by and take for granted," Tinsky said.

Caption: 1 MAP
The Model City School Project, anchored by the new Florence Griffith Joyner Elementary, was to include retail, apartments, condominiums, recreation areas and a community clinic. SOURCE: San Diego Model School Project Development Agency Edition: CO, C
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