Adequate parkland scarce in poor area; Council to discuss buying property
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The Fox Canyon neighborhood in City Heights is densely populated by immigrants and refugees from all over the world. It’s a poverty-stricken place where you will see a mosque next to a taco shack and a Asian temple within sight of a church.

One thing you don’t see much around Fox Canyon is parks.

For years now, the Fox Canyon Neighborhood Association has been trying to get parks built in the community, where children play in the streets because of a lack of recreational space. According to city calculations, the area is short 22 acres of parks relative to its population.

Two proposed neighborhood parks -- Fox Canyon and Wightman Street -- have both run into trouble, raising doubts on when and if they will ever get built.

The city still has not acquired the approximately 2 acres needed to build the Fox Canyon park, although its interest in acquiring the land at the end of Winona Avenue dates back to at least 2002.

The City Council is expected to discuss buying the property behind closed doors early next week. Larry Zajonc, the property owner, blames the lack of progress on the city for not dealing with him fairly.

The city offered Zajonc $475,000 at one point, but later appraised the property at about $52,000. City officials declined to discuss the matter, citing the upcoming closed session.

As recently as April 24, the city’s deputy director of real estate assets, David Sandoval, sent Zajonc a letter saying Zajonc's asking price is "far beyond the city’s estimation of value" and advising Zajonc to pursue other opportunities to sell his land.

The Wightman park, proposed on city-owned land that's prone to flooding, is scheduled for completion in 2010, but the city has identified only $696,000 of the more than $3 million needed for the project.

The city wants to shift a $2.36 million state grant earmarked for Fox Canyon to Wightman, but it must get permission from the state. The grant expires in June 2010, and the city hopes to submit a formal request to the state in 60 days to transfer the money.
A county grand jury report issued May 15 predicts the city will have a hard time persuading the state to do so.

Sandwiched between apartments and houses, the Wightman parcel is about half the size of the Fox Canyon portion the city wants for the park.

Even if the state approves the transfer of funds to Wightman, "the grant would have to be reduced in size. Further, "as a result of the hydrological survey conducted by the Park and Recreation Department, some parts of the property will not be built on, in order to avoid any flood damage.

"Why would the state fund a park that floods periodically?"

Patti Keating, grants chief with the California Department of Parks and Recreation, said shifting money from one project to another is made on a case-by-case basis. She said extending the grant beyond its expiration date would require legislative action.

The Fox Canyon association, which partnered with the city to get the state grant, dreams of creating a system of green space throughout the community that will be linked by trails. It has identified a string of parcels for parks.

"We will continue to work on one parcel at a time until we see the park we want to see," said Jose Lopez, who heads the association.

The association was founded in 1997 to improve residents' quality of life by combating crime, noise, graffiti and environmental decay. The 92105 ZIP code, which includes Fox Canyon, has an estimated median household income of $28,251, according to the San Diego Association of Governments. The same data shows that many residents don't speak English well or at all.

Lopez said it's disheartening that despite the association's activism, so little progress has been made on Fox Canyon.

One bright spot is the newly opened Auburn Park, a half acre lot off University Avenue and 52nd Street. It was built by an affordable housing developer next to its apartment project by the same name. Although privately owned, it's open for public use.

Acquiring the land for the Fox Canyon park is not the only problem the city faces. The project can't proceed without resolving the contentious matter of whether a two-lane road should be built through the canyon.

An unpaved foot path that now traverses the trash-strewn canyon is popular with residents seeking a shortcut.

On paper, a road called Ontario Avenue cuts through the canyon. Lopez said his association wants Ontario built to allow another way in and out of the area. However,
opponents say the road is unnecessary and would only increase traffic on residential streets. The grant application for the Fox Canyon park did not include the road, which would handle an estimated 2,000 daily car trips there.

All agree parks are needed even if they disagree about the road.

"The Mid-City is tired of promises for city infrastructure that never comes, and the fact that density keeps coming and infrastructure never comes," said John Stump, a longtime City Heights resident who has raised concerns about the road and the lack of environmental study on its impact.

Caption: 1 MAP 1 PIC
1. A man jogged on a path through Fox Canyon in City Heights. According to city calculations, the area is short 22 acres of parks relative to its population. 2. Proposed Wightman Street park 1. John Gibbins / Union-Tribune 2. SOURCE: SanGIS, AARON STECKELBERG / Union-Tribune

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