Accolades went to developer William Jones at yesterday's official opening of the $30.7 million City Heights Retail Village, a shopping center at the core of the San Diego neighborhood's urban renewal.

Advantages, though, went to residents such as Shanell Lofton, who lugged groceries out of the recently opened Albertson's, and Ana Flores, who watched over her three children at the new playground across the street, and Karen Manley, who attended community meetings seven years ago and witnessed the birth of a dream.

Manley said her first visit to the shopping center south of University Avenue and east of Fairmount Street "made me feel special that we finally had something in our neighborhood that we had pride in."

The 6 1/2 -block renewal project, dubbed Urban Village and including the shopping center, means a lot to resident Brenda Lesane. She has lived in City Heights for more than 50 years.

"I was going to sell my property and then I met Mr. Jones," Lesane said. "He said, 'I promise you I am going to make your neighborhood 100 percent better,' and here it is."

Jones stood on the outdoor theater's stage, across the street from the shopping center, and accepted proclamations from Mayor Dick Murphy, Assemblywoman Christine Kehoe and City Councilwoman Toni Atkins. They said his vision for the most diverse neighborhood in San Diego will be the model for future city projects.

Before the official ceremony began, Jones stood on a street corner and shook hands with dozens of people who thanked him for what he did for City Heights.

Besides the shopping center, which is 95 percent leased, there's a public library, police substation and community gymnasium, adult education center, day care, theater, swimming pool and tennis courts. And the neighborhood shares playing fields with Rosa Parks Elementary School, which opened in 1997.

In realizing the entire project, Jones' for-profit company, CityLink Investment Corp., worked with La Jolla-based Price Entities, which is building a mixed-use office and residential complex with 116 town houses across from the shopping center. Jones negotiated with the San Diego Community College District to build an adult learning center between Fairmount Avenue and 43rd Street.
New York-based Local Initiatives Support Corp. assisted with shopping center financing. The city secured the land for it through eminent domain, which meant relocating 141 residences and 26 businesses.

"If we're able to have a perfect outcome, it would be that multiple investors, developers, residents and government bodies work in dynamic partnership that will prolong the investment expansion in this inner city for decades to come," said Jones, a former city councilman who graduated from Morse High School in Skyline before attending Harvard Business School. "This is not a sprint. This is a long-term effort to change the way people think about their neighborhoods."

It certainly changed the way residents Lofton and Flores view it.

"It means a great deal," four-year resident Lofton said, as she hung grocery bags from her youngest child's stroller. "Before, most of what we had were little corner liquor stores that had mainly alcohol for content and the products were expensive."

"A lot of people say City Heights is bad," said Flores, who has lived there 10 years, and was with her children at the playground. "But now we have a place to have fun. It's good to have a park here so the kids won't be thinking about gangs and drugs."

Although retailers typically shy away from inner-city locations, City Heights has McDonald's, Papa John's Pizza, Subway Sandwiches and Blockbuster Video. There's even a Starbucks Coffee.

"We have arrived if corporate America thinks this is a good community to be in," said Atkins. "We're not done, but we're certainly on our way."

Caption: 2 MAPS 2 PICS
1,2. Urban Village 3. Children from San Diego's City Heights neighborhood enjoyed their new playground that is part of the Retail Village renewal development. The new facilities were officially opened during ceremonies yesterday. 4. William Jones (holding scissors at center) led a group in the ribbon-cutting ceremonies yesterday at the entrance to the City Heights Retail Village. 1,2. SOURCE: CityLink Investment Corp., CRISTINA MARTINEZ / Union-Tribune 3,4. Nadia Borowski Scott / Union-Tribune photos

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