The view from the window of the bus was bracing: abandoned houses, a declining business district, dozens of jobless people hanging out on street corners.

"I felt like a tourist in my own city," said Hawley Ridenour, an official in the adult employment division of the San Diego Department of Social Services.

Still, Ridenour and 30 other activists, scholars and businesspeople who toured the City Heights district yesterday saw some signs of hope sprouting through the cracked pavement.

"There are two new schools here, which are part of the central construction of a community-commercial block," said Jerry Robinson, a sales manager at Bank of America Mortgage.

He said his company provides home loans to first-time buyers in midcity neighborhoods to help spur revitalization. "I see some good things going on," Robinson said.

The all-day bus tour for community leaders was organized by Eureka San Diego, a networking service for nonprofit agencies. Its director is Richard Ybarra, a former aide to Cesar Chavez, who founded the United Farm Workers.

Ybarra said it was his intention to bring a cross-section of civic leaders face-to-face with people stuck in the underclass -- and with people striving to pull them into the working class.

"We have as many complexities, challenges and problems (in City Heights) as anywhere in the United States," he said.

City Heights is bordered by Interstate 805, Highway 94, El Cajon Boulevard and 54th Street and is populated by 70,000 people who speak more than 100 dialects.

Many of the high school students in the area drop out, Ybarra said, and 49 percent of people under 17 live in poverty. The rate of violent crime is two to three times higher than elsewhere in the city.

At lunchtime presentations at the Neighborhood Service Center, however, there were messages that the district may become a mecca of commerce and education.

For example, a former student at Hoover High School told how a medical-biotech academy, which started in 1995 on campus, is giving students a working alternative to
drugs and gangs.

Michael Sprague, a longtime activist, outlined the ongoing development of the $170 million City Heights Urban Village, which is located off Fairmount Avenue. The project includes a police station, community center and two schools. In coming years it will be the site of numerous commercial enterprises.

"Pride has zoomed," Sprague said. "There's no more graffiti, and we don't see abandoned homes" near the village.

Caption: 1 PIC
Problem solver: Richard Ybarra, director of Eureka San Diego, leads a discussion at the Neighborhood Service Center during a break in yesterday's bus tour of City Heights.

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