Town council to lose rent-free office; Eviction is retribution, City Heights activists say

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A group of community activists brought into power during a revitalization of City Heights is being evicted from its office in the heart of the redeveloped area.

City officials say the local library branch wants to use the small second-story space for offices and storage.

Michael Sprague, one of the original members of the City Heights Town Council, said he believes his group is being evicted as retribution for speaking out at San Diego City Council meetings. Two years ago, Sprague expressed concern about the way redevelopment agency elections were conducted in his community.

The town council moved into an office in the redeveloped Urban Village in 1998. Community participation was required as part of the redevelopment of a blighted section of City Heights , and an informal group of leaders was solidified as a town council.

Town council members worry if they are evicted, they not only will lose their rent-free space on Fairmont Avenue, but also their presence in the revitalized community core. The council does bookkeeping for a handful of organizations, including neighborhood associations, anti-graffiti teams and a prostitution task force, council members said.

The town council had its major source of funding pulled two years ago after it allegedly failed to meet requirements during a period of political infighting on the council. The town council can't afford to find new office space, Sprague said.

"Not paying rent is crucial to us being able to keep our doors open," he said.

Vice president Ed Doolittle can't understand why city officials want his group out of the building.

"Other than trying to quiet the town council, I don't see where they are going to gain anything," Doolittle said.

The city's Real Estate Assets office pursued the eviction because the library needs the space. The City Attorney's Office has been attempting to evict the town council since last summer, filing a lawsuit that was dismissed by the court. This summer the office filed the same suit again.

The 18-member town council set up shop in the Fairmont Avenue building in 1998 and keeps office hours four days a week. Town council officials believe a city order granted

the organization office space in the building, though they don't have a lease agreement in writing.

The building is owned by the San Diego Foundation and leased back to the city of San Diego for $450,000 a year. The city receives an annual rebate of at least $330,000 for maintaining the building.

City officials say the town council has never paid rent, or electricity and water bills, said Yolanda Gammill, a deputy city attorney. Gammill said she has given the organization eviction notices repeatedly, but its members still refuse to move out.

"We've tried to work with them for a long period of time," she said. "We didn't want it to get to this point."

Doolittle said because the building is owned by the foundation, the town council isn't a tenant of the city.

The case has been tabled so the two sides can try to come to an agreement. Lawyer Mike Aguirre, who is running for city attorney in the March primary, has intervened on the group's behalf.

City Councilwoman Toni Atkins said town council infighting made some people want to distance themselves from the group, but with new organization it is moving in the right direction. Atkins said she has been trying to negotiate a compromise on their behalf.

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Ed Doolittle, vice president of the City Heights Town Council, said he doesn't understand why San Diego officials are forcing his group out of its office space. Nancee E. Lewis / Union-Tribune
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