A people’s pride burning bright: Lantern festival highlights effort to create Little Saigon district
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Starting today, 6,000 lanterns will shine the brightest light yet on an effort to turn six gritty blocks of San Diego's El Cajon Boulevard into a Little Saigon district.

The celebration should be a far cry from the fear-mongering that followed a wider effort in Westminster 30 years ago or the political intrigue that has overshadowed the current call for a Vietnamese district in San Jose.

Thirty-five years after the fall of Saigon and the influx of refugees that it triggered in the U.S., Vietnamese-Americans have created Little Saigons from Orange County to Orlando.

That list could include a district in San Diego within two years if the Little Saigon Foundation, a band of young and business-savvy Vietnamese volunteers, is successful. If it is, a quarter-mile of well-traveled road between City Heights and Talmadge could be redone with Little Saigon signs and a lot of business and cultural activity.

The foundation, which organized this weekend's lantern festival at Hoover High School, found widespread support for its idea last year among businesses in that six-block stretch. Its next goal is to improve the ambience and safety of the area with things such as planters and better lighting while also fostering a greater sense of community.

Official recognition for the district could come by fall 2012, said foundation president Frank Vuong, 31.

That would connect San Diego's Vietnamese to a time in their homeland before Saigon became Ho Chi Minh City and with others similarly situated across America. It would let them plant one foot in the past and one in the future.

"The idea is by branding a community, you introduce a catalyst and that catalyst has to do with pride and culture and self-empowerment," Vuong said. "It will encourage people to invest in their own community, to fix the store fronts, to engage in civic responsibility and to create new business, new jobs and ... inspire new young leaders."

There are about 120 businesses on this stretch of El Cajon Boulevard, and at least 70 are Vietnamese-owned or operated. More than 100 of them completed a June 2009 survey about the potential district.

Of 101 responses, 83 merchants expressed definite support, 13 said they would most likely support it, four said they would not and one conveyed ambivalence.

The survey and the fact that the area is already so heavily Vietnamese suggest that a push for a Little Saigon there won't run into the opposition encountered in other regions.
In Orange County, which became home to droves of refugees who fled the Vietnam War, vacant strip malls in Westminster offered opportunities. But former Westminster Mayor Kathy Buchoz remembers the subsequent white flight.

Hundreds of people signed petitions asking the City Council not to give business licenses to the Vietnamese, she said. Later, when 15 or 20 Little Saigon signs were installed around town, half were defaced with red paint.

Now, Buchoz said, the area is "vibrant, alive, bustling."

The divide over how to name the Little Saigon district in San Jose forced a Vietnamese councilwoman to beat back a recall attempt.

In San Diego, resistance comes from auto and other non-Vietnamese business owners who don't believe a district would draw tourists, said Teresa Nguyen, 22, vice president of the Little Saigon Foundation.

Mindful of the potential friction, Su Nguyen, who started the foundation, said the group's goals are universal.

"We want to beautify San Diego," said Nguyen, 35, who isn't related to Teresa Nguyen. "We want San Diego to have a place where people, not Vietnamese only, but every people, can be proud."

The largely Vietnamese section of El Cajon Boulevard, readily apparent from the store signs if not the architecture, is part of a larger district overseen by the El Cajon Boulevard Business Improvement Association.

That association represents 900 businesses along four miles of El Cajon Boulevard, from Park Boulevard to 54th Street.

Beryl Forman, marketing manager for the association, said it has long wanted to recognize its unique clusters — such as Vietnamese, Latinos and East Africans.

"Vietnamese have been around here for three generations," she said. "They've made quite an impact in this district and other parts of San Diego."

People pushing for San Diego's Little Saigon said it may be less controversial than elsewhere because it is inherently less political.

Westminster's district designation came from a vote of the state Legislature. In San Jose, the City Council approved the Saigon Business District name, then rescinded its vote in the wake of criticism.

San Diego's district, on the other hand, requires buy-in from the El Cajon Boulevard business association but no official political involvement.

Even so, Councilman Todd Gloria and Rep. Susan Davis, D-San Diego, have toured the
area, and Gloria aide Dion Akers is following the developments.

"It's folks wanting to come together for what they've got in common and make their stretch of El Cajon Boulevard better," Akers said. Little Saigon survey

In June 2009, a local Vietnamese group polled businesses along El Cajon Boulevard between Highland and Euclid avenues to gauge support for a Little Saigon district. It found:

83

definitely support it

13

most likely support it

4

did not support it

1

was indifferent

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Caption: 2 PICS
David Nguyen, 16, hangs lanterns at Hoover High School on Wednesday as part of preparation for this weekend's San Diego Lantern Festival. The event raises money for the Little Saigon Foundation. PEGGY PEATTIE • U-T, KimTran, 17, wires lanterns together on Wednesday to help get ready for the San Diego Lantern Festival at Hoover High School. PEGGY PEATTIE • U-T

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