At last, key I-15 project begins; City Heights residents, others express relief
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With the roar of a bulldozer and a flurry of speeches, the long-awaited construction of a final 2-mile stretch of Interstate 15 through Normal Heights, Kensington and City Heights began yesterday.

"I want to see dirt flying," Marie Carver of City Heights said after hearing officials praise the start of construction. "It was way too long in coming, and I'm glad it's finally here."

Nothing has so literally and figuratively divided these older neighborhoods as has the often-delayed freeway project, said residents and officials who gathered at the intersection of Monroe Avenue and Terrace Drive for a groundbreaking ceremony.

Since 1957, people have talked and planned of building the county's last section of freeway that runs from Canada nearly to Mexico.

Houses in the freeway corridor along 40th Street were condemned, demolished and cleared.

"Getting to this point has been one heck of an emotional roller coaster ride," said Karen Manley, who was among those leading a citizen drive to complete the freeway in a way that would least disrupt the neighborhood.

"Life here has been very stressful. At times, it has been unbearable," Manley said. "This community, once again, will begin to prosper and grow."

Pointing to traffic crawling along 40th Street, Manley said: "When it's complete, that traffic will be on the freeway where it belongs."

The $153 million link runs from just north of Adams Avenue to just south of Wightman Street. Construction is expected to take three years, but Caltrans district director Gary Gallegos said, "We'll see if we can even do better than that."

"You all have waited too long," he said.

Plans call for one block of the freeway between Polk Avenue and Orange Avenue to run below street level and be covered with a park.

Bridges will be constructed at Wightman Street, University Avenue, Orange Avenue, El Cajon Boulevard and Meade Avenue. Polk Avenue, Monroe Avenue and Landis Street will be closed where they intersect the freeway. Pedestrian bridges are planned near
Landis Street and at Monroe Avenue.

City Councilwoman Christine Kehoe said the link will be "a little more friendly than your average superhighway."

"We have done our best to come up with a project we could all live with," said Kehoe, whose 3rd District encompasses the construction site.

California Transportation Secretary Dean Dunphy said that section of the freeway will have several uses, because it is being built with room for special bus or trolley lanes. Pipes that can be used for fiber optic cable will be placed underneath.

"We're trying to do more than make freeways that just carry automobiles," Dunphy said.

He said it took an "inordinate and unconscionable" amount of time to begin construction.

"It's been a long time; it's about time," said U.S. Rep. Bob Filner, D-San Diego, a member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

Filner said that when he first began running for public office 17 years ago, he had his first news conference on the vacant land that will become the freeway, "yelling at the government for not doing its job."

Kehoe said that despite the enthusiasm over the start of construction, "This is going to be a very difficult to endure, and the time line of three years is a long one."

Arthur and Anna Marcello of City Heights said they were happy to see construction start, but that they still had some reservations about the project.

"We don't know exactly how it's going to look," Arthur Marcello said. Added his wife: "The saddest day was when they removed all those homes."

A skeptical Roger Huffer said, "I don't believe it but it looks like they're going to start." He lives across the street from part of the freeway corridor, and said the barren land has been serious blight.

"This is finally the beginning of the end, is what this is," Kensington resident Al Reese said.

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Correction: CORRECTIONS A story yesterday on construction of the last two miles of Interstate 15 incorrectly said Arthur and Anna Marcello live in City Heights. They live in Kensington. The San Diego Union-Tribune regrets the error. (960515, B-2:7,8; B-