City acts to get land for shop center in redevelopment area

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Author: Ray Huard

Up to $9.8 million of city money would be used to acquire land by eminent domain to build a shopping center in the final portion of a $100 million City Heights redevelopment project under a plan approved by the San Diego City Council yesterday.

Councilwoman Christine Kehoe said the shopping center anchored by a Lucky supermarket and Sav-On pharmacy was "the capstone to a model redevelopment project."

"This is the payoff that we've been waiting for all these years," said Kehoe, whose district includes the 6 1/2 -block Urban Village project, which has been planned since 1994.

Parts already completed include a police station, a swimming pool, tennis courts, a library, an outdoor theater and a community center.

The project is bounded on the north by University Avenue, on the west by Fairmount Avenue, on the east by Highland Avenue and on the south by Wightman Street.

The council in December approved a financing plan for the shopping center. Private investment in the overall redevelopment project includes a $5.3 million donation from philanthropist Sol Price.

The action yesterday clears the way for the city to acquire parts of the property whose owners did not want to sell.

Some of those owners and their lawyer said it was unfair for the city to boot them out.

"My family and I do not want to sell my property to the city of San Diego because my store is making money now," said Chanh Cao, owner of the 99-cent Discount Center at 4373 University Ave. "We work very hard, 10 to 15 hours a day."

Deputy City Attorney Leslie Fitzgerald said the city would help businesses such as Cao's to relocate. About $3.5 million has been earmarked to help with relocation and other elements of the shopping center project in addition to the money set aside to acquire the land.

Lawyer Rhonda J. Holmes-Thompson, representing several property owners, said the city was "displacing long-time property and business owners" to benefit another business.
City redevelopment director Patricia Hightman said the shopping center was a vital part of the redevelopment because it would serve about 80,000 people who currently have no comparable stores in their community.

Hightman said the shopping center would "act as a catalyst for new private development and investment." She said some business owners who are being displaced could find space in the new center.