Council buries ambitious plan for I-15 cover; Compromise kills vision for City Heights project

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The Visions Project for covering portions of Interstate 15 through City Heights was killed by the City Council yesterday after it became apparent the innovative but costly plan was fracturing the community it was to serve.

Instead, in a compromise plan offered by Councilman John Hartley, Caltrans will agree to enhance landscaping and upgrade bridges and ramps along the 2.2 miles of freeway down the 40th Street corridor.

The compromise plan, approved on an 8-1 vote, actually weakens the commitment the city had made to the project because it does not include about $20 million in funding for a block of cover at Landis and Wightman streets that was to be a park.

Caltrans is committed to providing a block of freeway cover between Orange and Polk avenues. The freeway segment from Interstate 8 south across El Cajon Boulevard and beyond Landis Street is expected to be finished in 1998.

The segment has been planned since the late 1950s and would complete a freeway extending to the Canadian border.

Over the last three weeks, tempers frayed during public hearings and discussions at City Council meetings as it became apparent the community was becoming polarized over the issue.

Homeowners saw property values jeopardized and the continuation of a deteriorating, crime-ridden neighborhood. Backers saw the chance of revitalizing the community with open space and a future town center dashed by political expediency and the fears of residents living in limbo.

Proponents of the ambitious Visions plan cried "sellout" in the council chamber yesterday when the votes were counted. Only Councilman Bob Filner voted against the compromise, calling Caltrans "obstructionist" and unresponsive.

"The forces of the highway lobby wanted a freeway at any cost, and they succeeded at the expense of Visions," said Jay Powell, the project manager of the project for the City HeightsCommunity Development Corporation (CHCDC).

"We already had a compromise and were ready to go back to the drawing board to solve any problems," he said. "They just pulled the rug out from under us."
I-15 Now, the group pushing to have the much-delayed freeway completed as soon as possible, relished the decision.

"I had white-haired senior citizens who wanted this freeway for the last 35 years tell me 'good luck' because they never thought this would happen," said Karen Manley, leader of I-15 Now.

"We were fighting a corporation (CHCDC) that tried to do a selling job on the community. If you didn't agree with them, you weren't included in their plans. We had to go through tough times," Manley said.

The streets have become decidedly meaner in City Heights since the mid-1980s when the extensive Visions Project was planned. Crime has been on the rise, blocks of buildings have been razed and many buildings have deteriorated while residents waited on Caltrans to finally complete the project.

The economic uncertainty of the recession and Caltrans' prediction that Visions could delay the freeway for several more years prevented backers from selling the idea to the City Council. The concrete covers alone would have added an estimated $60 million to the freeway project.

"This is a community under siege, with crime and a crumbling infrastructure," said Hartley in offering the compromise; his district includes the freeway development.

"A fractured community needs to go in a new direction."

Ironically, the city manager's office spent the last three weeks working with Caltrans to come up with several alternatives that would allow much of the project to continue while the initial phases of construction continue on the freeway.

The major stumbling blocks remained, however. There was the need to find funding for a shortfall of up to $23 million and the prospect that the necessary environmental studies to meet federal requirements could cause further delays.

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