City Heights aim: Accentuate positive
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When real estate agent Matt Giacalone used to visit the City Heights neighborhood, he saw only crime, drugs and urban blight.

But after talking to residents and touring the area as part of the three-day City Heights Economic & Crime Summit, Giacalone was so enthusiastic he broke into song: a verse of "Accentuate the Positive."

"There has been a blanket of negative that has been over the community for too long," Giacalone said. "Take it off."

Spontaneous outbursts of singing, cheering and clapping were common on the last day of the City Heights summit, a solution-oriented look at one of the city's most diverse neighborhoods.

More than 250 people participated in the event at Wilson Academy on Orange Avenue, which included an overnight stay at the school. City officials, politicians and community activists organized the summit, billed as a "call to action" to address the neighborhood's problems.

After three days of intense debate and discussion, the participants were tired but enthusiastic, debating with the easy familiarity of people who have camped out together in a gym on metal cots.

The main challenge facing City Heights is an overwhelmingly negative image, both within the city and within neighborhood boundaries, participants agreed.

"It's time to quit beating each other up and beating up City Heights," said San Diego City Manager Jack McGrory. McGrory pledged city support for the summit's suggestions.

City Heights, home to more than 67,000 people, does have serious and chronic problems, participants said. But those problems are offset by wide-ranging diversity, strong families and a thriving, ethnic-based economy.

According to the 1990 census, the makeup of City Heights residents is 30 percent white, 23 percent black, 30 percent Hispanic and 17 percent Asian. Crime rates are high, fueled by crack cocaine sales and gangs.

The neighborhood can fight crime and its negative image by resident patrols and by consistently cleaning up trash and graffiti, resident Les Pierres Streater said.
"We want the business community to clean up its act," said Streater, a member of the crime committee at the summit.

Once the community's external appearance is under control, participants said, residents can focus on addressing underlying poverty and joblessness in a systematic fashion. One way to boost business and home ownership in the area is to start a community bank to focus the community's economic clout, Giacalone said.

The summit, the first of its kind in the city, is a model for future city-resident cooperation, City Councilwoman Christine Kehoe said.

"The process is very much the important part of it," Kehoe said. "The energy and community the participants have expressed this weekend is very inspiring. We're kind of going to the next level."

Resident John Pha Chea, a representative of the Cambodian Cultural Preservation Association, said: "It's the first time community leaders have had an opportunity to get together. It's good getting together like this."

Other summit proposals:

[] A five-year moratorium on new multifamily housing.

[] Neighborhood tree planting.

[] Promotion of home ownership and owner occupancy.

[] Cultural awareness training for law-enforcement officers.

[] Limiting liquor and adult entertainment outlets.

[] Better lighting for streets.

[] Speed bumps on streets and alleys.

[] Tougher penalties for drug buyers.

[] More funding for City Heights on Patrol, a neighborhood patrol group.

[] Tougher code enforcement.

[] Latchkey programs and health clinics in neighborhood schools.

The summit's conclusions will be presented to the San Diego City Council in two weeks,
and participants plan to reconvene in one month to work out the details of taking action on this weekend's proposals.

Caption: 1 PIC
Park to grow: Lew Pond (right), executive vice president of Midcity Development Corp., explains plans for expansion of Highland-Landis Park to a group studying City Heights area. The city-owned houses in background are slated for removal. Union-Tribune / JERRY RIFE

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