Politicians declare City Heights a drug 'state of emergency'

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Rep. Jim Bates, D-San Diego, joined City Councilman John Hartley in front of a charred house on 40th Street to declare a "state of emergency" in City Heights because of drive-by shootings and abandoned and dilapidated "drug houses."

In itself, the unofficial declaration means little, but Bates and Hartley hope the city, county, and state will take notice.

The particular problem in City Heights is that many homes have been acquired and condemned by CalTrans for the widening of Interstate 15. Residents say the abandoned houses are not razed fast enough, and overnight they become havens for drug dealers and users.

The two officials were joined by a group of neighbors who live along 40th, from Orange Avenue to University, and residents of other sections of City Heights, who said they fear for their lives.

"I won't let my 10-year-old daughter on our front yard," said Carol Seneff, a neighbor. "I'm too afraid of the shootings and the drugs. These abandoned houses are where the drug dealers hang out."

Bates said he made a special point to visit City Heights, after meeting with community leaders and Neighborhood Watch residents.

"This is a community under siege," Bates said. "These abandoned houses, owned by the state, need (to be) demolished, and they need demolished now.

"I'm going to write a letter to the city asking for the council's support in identifying this area in an official state of emergency. There are drugs, there's fear. It's lawlessness."

Hartley added, "We are here today at the scene of a recent fire along 40th Street. The property is owned by CalTrans along with much of the other property along 40th.

"But it has not been demolished as promised."

Paul Downey, Mayor Maureen O'Connor's spokesman, said later, "The mayor and council declared a state of emergency for all drug areas in the city a year ago. We'd like to welcome Mr. Bates and Mr. Harley on board."

Downey said the mayor did not single out City Heights.
He said Mayor O'Connor asked the governor to declare a state of emergency in San Diego for drugs, without success.

"But Mayor O'Connor has met successfully on three occasions with (President Bush's) drug czar, William Bennett," Downey said.

"As a result of those meetings, San Diego is part of the federal plan for fighting drugs in the country. San Diego is now a high priority."

Said Bates, "We need federal money to help, and I'm trying to get it. That's what I'm working on.

"If these CalTrans houses are a health and safety hazard, maybe we can get the county involved in trying to demolish them on that basis," Bates said.

Neither Bates nor Hartley knew how many houses are involved, but both said they would seek that data from CalTrans.

"I'm going to the federal government for money to fight this drug problem. I can't think of a neighborhood with a greater drug problem than this one," Bates said.

Hartley expressed anger that the San Diego Association of Governments, SANDAG, has issued a report placing the projected demolition in what Hartley called a low-priority category.

"SANDAG has sent its requested priority list of highway and streets projects to Sacramento," Hartley said. "No funds were earmarked to complete the job of demolishing these homes until 1994.

"The failure to complete this project is more than a case of unfixed potholes or unlandscaped medians," Hartley said. "The abandoned homes on 40th Street are a public safety emergency. Transients, criminals and gangs are using these locations for illegal and violent activity."

Karen Grimmer, a local resident, said, "I didn't know it would be like this when we moved here. Across from our house there's an apartment that was used as a 'crack' house. It took the police six months to close it down."

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