Congressmen seek funds to develop park on covered freeway at 40th St.

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An oft-delayed freeway project got a boost yesterday when local congressmen requested that seven blocks of 40th Street in San Diego be included as part of the National Highway System.

The move, if approved, would free federal funding that could allow a block of 40th Street to be covered and developed into a park.

The city and the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) already have agreed to cover two other blocks of the proposed freeway to revitalize the blighted City Heights neighborhood in East San Diego.

"Three blocks gives us sufficient space to create a town center," said John William Stump III, treasurer of the City Heights Community Development Corp. "We've been waiting for this to happen for 25 years. We need urban renewal, and this is our opportunity to take the lemons of the freeway and make lemonade."

Stump said he envisions the three covered blocks as areas where parkland, public-service buildings and shops would be built. The City Council is expected to review drawings of the town center plan May 21, he said.

Yesterday, Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham, R-San Diego, met with city leaders and community activists on a vacant lot off 40th Street to discuss improvements that may be coming to the area.

He pointed to nearby Central Elementary School and talked of the safety problems that could result if an eight-lane freeway were built so close to the school.

However, the inclusion of six miles of 40th Street, which is now designated state Route 15, as part of Interstate 15 would allow federal funds to be used to build parkland adjacent to the school grounds, Cunningham said.

The one-block covered area involved in yesterday's request is expected to cost about $25 million.

By putting the freeway underground, "we can do something positive for the community, instead of damaging the community," Cunningham said.

"You'll have a park here, instead of concrete," he said.
His letter to fellow members of Congress requesting the change was also signed by Rep. Duncan Hunter R-Coronado; Rep. Bill Lowery, R-San Diego; and Rep. Ron Packard, R-Oceanside.

Covered freeways have been built in other communities, including Phoenix, Ariz.; Seattle; and Boston. Such cut-and-cover freeways often are viewed as ways to lessen the negative effects of freeway projects, Caltrans spokesman Kyle Nelson said.

"You basically dig a big trench to put a roadway in and cap it over -- build a bridge over it that can hold anything from a park to stores to community housing," Nelson said. "It's a way to give something back to the community."

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