

Price debate highlights region's woes

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The fine thing that Sol Price has given San Diego is a neighborhood to argue about. Not that City Heights wasn't there before, but Price 's efforts in the mid-city community -- combining social programs with physical rehabilitation -- have drawn glowing media accounts from across the nation. Adoration is the antithesis of real debate .

The fine thing that Maria Martinez-Cosio, a UCSD researcher, gave Sol Price two weeks ago was criticism -- an outside review, something every experiment needs. She pointed out that City Heights redevelopment, meant to help the poor, is pushing many of them out. This outcome should have been expected and planned for, she advised, and Price should intensify his efforts to create affordable housing, and listen more carefully to low-income residents.

Instead of disputing the report's statistical accuracy, Jack McGrory, former city manager and executive vice president of San Diego Revitalization, the redevelopment arm of Price Charities, and Lina Ericsson, housing and community development director for Price Charities, declared that Martinez-Cosio had raised valid concerns and fleshed out in numbers what they had suspected by instinct. But the report also sparked anger - some of it directed at Price -- that has been smoldering for years.

Community activists in other areas of the city assert that, while no one wants to offend powerful Price , "the problem is that Price Charities is eating up every cent of the city's redevelopment tax increment" while other parts of the urban core are neglected, as one of them put it.

Others, like former City Council candidate Daniel Beeman, who lives in adjacent North Park, charge that the rush to gentrify mid-city amounts to densification without representation. And some City Heights residents, while pleased with the new shopping center, library and other amenities, are tired of existing under the microscope of social experimentation -- tired of living in Guinea Pig Heights, as some of them call it.

Jim Gilbert, senior pastor of the Fairmount Baptist Church in City Heights for 11 years, says he's been haranguing Price about gentrification for nearly two years.

"I have tried to get Mr. Price to look into community land trusts and limited equity housing cooperatives, as well as just providing more help to nonprofit, affordable-housing developers," Gilbert says. "But, frankly, he is not enthusiastic about helping very low-income people. He is eager to help those of modest incomes to purchase a home, or one of the new town homes he is building. But the majority of residents, who make less than \$26,000, cannot benefit from such programs and are in great danger of

being priced out."

Making the housing problem far worse, he adds, are the new schools mandated under Proposition MM. "City Heights has already lost over 1,000 units of housing to the redevelopment efforts and to new schools, and around 1,000 more units are expected to be demolished in the next three years as five new schools are built. And no one is responsible for replacing that housing," Gilbert says.

In fairness, Price is working on a controversial plan with the San Diego Unified School District. Instead of a sprawling suburban-style school, the district would build at least one multistory school with underground parking and joint-use recreational facilities. The 253 removed homes would be replaced with 375 larger units in a denser residential development at the perimeter of the school.

However, because of the district's construction timeline, other schools planned for the mid-city are unlikely to be so forward looking.

San Diego Revitalization also has a plan to replace lost homes and make housing more affordable, though McGrory is hazy on just how many units will be created. As reported here last week, part of the Price plan is to sell new town homes, retain ownership of the land and charge rent for the land; owners may choose to pay the rent outright, or work it off by doing community service in the neighborhood. Owners can sell the structures, but not the land -- and that, theoretically, will keep the housing affordable.

Gilbert and other critics aren't impressed. They see the Price plan as a watered down form of an urban land trust approach that has proved successful in other areas of the country, one that places more restrictions on sales, essentially taking the home out of the marketplace. Price 's housing plan must still be approved by the state. The second hurdle is financing. Ironically, the more stringent land trust has established itself in lenders' eyes more than Price 's model, and is more easily financed.

Other options exist: limited-equity cooperatives, nonprofit rental housing and rent control. As the state's housing crunch tightens, these will get more attention -- to the irritation of building industry interests, who say such methods are tantamount to moving the deck chairs around on the Titanic. The real problem, they say, is the restrictive regulation that drives up the price of new housing.

Moreover, Robert Vallera Jr., past president of the San Diego County Apartment Association, says San Diego could come close to solving its housing crisis "with the stroke of a pen, and without any grand bureaucratic schemes, by better utilizing our most underutilized residential land. Allowing companion units on single-family lots (granny flats) would still leave single-family neighborhoods at fairly low densities and disperse additional units throughout the region."

Parking, of course, is another matter.

Last week, John Parr, director of the Center for Regional and Neighborhood Action, headquartered in Denver, toured City Heights. Curious to see what all the national media attention was about, he came away impressed but cautionary. Too many expectations are being placed on one neighborhood. No matter how well, or poorly, the City Heights experiment turns out, he says, "the truth is that no neighborhood can do it alone. In the end, this is a regional problem, one that can be solved only by regional remedies."

Last of three columns about the City Heights revival.

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