Forming an unusual partnership, the San Diego school district and City Hall have joined forces to plan for a community campus in City Heights that would put a school, park space, low-income housing and social services in one location.

The City Council and the school board yesterday voted to form a joint powers agency to plan the financing and design of the project. The city and the school district will establish a board of directors to oversee the planning.

"This is a significant achievement," said Mayor Dick Murphy.

Murphy and other City Council members said the project would be a model for the nation because of the cooperation it envisions between the city and the school district in providing new housing in conjunction with a new school.

Councilwoman Toni Atkins, whose district includes the proposed community campus, said the project would reverse a trend of eliminating housing to make way for schools in urban neighborhoods.

Nearly 250 housing units would be razed to make way for the campus, but they would be replaced by 350 new units -- with at least 165 set aside for low-income residents, said Elizabeth Morris, CEO of the San Diego Housing Commission.

A school alone would take out as many as 180 housing units without any residential replacement, she said.

The City Council voted unanimously to partner with the school district. The school board voted 3-to-2, with trustees Frances O'Neill Zimmerman and John de Beck opposing out of concern the city might not come up with the money to finance its end of the project. The dissenting trustees also expressed concern that the project would circumvent redevelopment law.

The San Diego Unified School District already has $20 million to $30 million set aside to build the school -- with or without a city partnership -- to relieve crowding at Edison, Hamilton and Parks elementary schools in City Heights.

The council made no financial commitments yesterday. It would be up to the joint powers authority to develop a financing proposal. The city also will seek state legislation to clarify the role of the joint powers authority.

The city-school district partnership would be modeled after a similar arrangement the
city formed with the county to build the downtown Hall of Justice.

Early estimates put a $140 million to $150 million price tag on the project, but one of the first tasks of the new authority would be to refine the estimate.

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