City Heights revitalization backed by council, residents

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A $281 million plan to revitalize a blighted nine-block section of City Heights as part of the completion of the Interstate 15 freeway has received the City Council's backing along with strong support from area residents.

The novel plan calls for redesign of the proposed I-15 freeway extension to make the corridor through City Heights into a "symbolic and functional center" of the community by covering sections of the eight-lane freeway with decks encompassing parks, town squares, a post office, library, transit stations and other amenities.

The plan was accepted enthusiastically last week by the City Council, which asked the city manager to analyze the proposal and return within 60 days with recommendations for implementation.

A crowd of about 300 people jammed the University Heights Recreation Center as the plan was presented to the council. Two dozen of them spoke in favor of the plan, while six criticized various aspects.

Called "A Vision for the Future," the revitalization plan evolved from community concerns that the completion of Interstate 15 along the 40th Street corridor would serve only to divide the community further and lower property values.

The area is a high-crime neighborhood with a run-down look characterized by numerous lots left vacant by the removal earlier of scores of homes to make way for the freeway.

The California Department of Transportation is set to begin construction this fall or early next year on the last 2.2-mile segment of I-15 in the San Diego area. The roadway will be 25 feet below ground level as it passes through the Mid-City area along the current route of 40th Street.

Caltrans' $149 million plan, which has been in the works for 20 years, called for only two covered blocks over the new freeway, with both of them being parks.

But under the nine-block community revitalization plan, five block-long sections of the freeway between Landis Street and Adams Avenue would be covered with parks, retail businesses, restaurants and public facilities such as village centers, a library and post office.

Major new town centers would be built where University Avenue and El Cajon Boulevard pass over the freeway, with the two centers to be connected by a new community green also atop the freeway. A fixed-rail transit line is also envisioned in the
freeway median with above-ground passenger stations at key locations.

"It is the result of a very large effort by the community to transform what had the potential to be a very negative influence into a community asset," said Barry Schultz, president of the non-profit City Heights Community Development Corp., which hired national consultants to develop the revitalization project.

Steven Cecil of Boston-based CBT Architects, lead consulting firm for the plan, said the City Council must take "swift and concerted action" for the far-sighted plan to succeed.

Key actions required in the weeks ahead, he said, include working with Caltrans to assure that the revitalization plan is compatible with the start of freeway construction while proceeding with the redevelopment project.

Only $149 million of the $281 million cost of the project is at present assured from the state. The remainder has yet to be obtained and is expected to come from federal, state and city sources.

The city-sponsored City Heights redevelopment project is expected to raise some $51.8 million in tax increment funds to help finance the improvements. Tax increments are a portion of the additional taxes generated in the area as a result of increased land values produced by the project.

Councilman John Hartley, who represents the Mid-City area, said that while he thought the original Caltrans plan would be divisive, the Visions Project is a blueprint for healing and revitalizing the neighborhood.

Support for the revitalization plan was also voiced by numerous other individuals and spokesmen for various community groups.

Among them was Bob Adkins, a 34-year resident of the 3700 block of 40th Street who said he has seen the neighborhood deteriorate from a quiet, pleasant residential street "to the monster that it is today."

He said 18-wheel trucks, although banned from 40th Street, still travel through the area "and noise and pollution have long since become intolerable."

Critics of the redevelopment plan included Kensington resident Elizabeth Comer, who complained that park developments north of El Cajon Boulevard at Madison and Monroe avenues could attract criminals and other undesirables to the area.

Comer said it would bring increased crime risks to residents of her neighborhood. She also submitted a petition to the council that she said bore the signatures of some 200 residents opposed to development of new parks north of El Cajon Boulevard as part of the revitalization project.