Redevelopment district may help fund I-15 plan

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San Diego is considering formation of a redevelopment district to finance a second block of landscaped tunnel for a planned freeway extension through Normal Heights, Kensington Park and East San Diego.

In an unusual touch, plans for two parks that would span part of the freeway would use automatic pollution alarms to warn people when carbon monoxide levels are too high for prolonged exposure.

Amid continuing protests from two community groups in the area, the San Diego City Council voted 6-1 yesterday to approve a preliminary design concept for the Interstate 15 project, including new bridges and walkways that would cross the sunken, eight-lane freeway.

The redevelopment district -- which the council agreed to study in a separate vote -- would allow increased property-tax revenues from the area to be earmarked for the city's share of the cover.

Proceeds from the 1988 half-percent sales-tax increase, which goes toward transportation, along with development-impact fees, also would be used to meet the city's estimated $18 million share.

Representatives of the City Heights Community Development Association and the Normal Heights Community Association said the city's financing scheme would divert money needed for other, more popular projects in the area and that two blocks of parkland would not be the best use of the planned freeway topside.

A cultural center, a police substation or some form of commercial revitalization would provide a better spur for redevelopment in the neighborhoods, said Barry J. Schultz, president of the City Heights Community Development Association. Schultz also questioned the value of a park that would have to be lined with pollution detectors for automobile emissions.

Judy Elliott, representing the Normal Heights Community Association, told the council that "there is no general support" for the project design from her community.

The $140 million project involves the long-planned 2.2-mile extension of Interstate 15 through the 40th Street corridor, to be constructed below grade so that existing cross streets, including University Avenue, would be left as bridges. The state Department of Transportation agreed to finance a one-block tunnel cover between Polk and Orange avenues. The city promised to pay for another block between Wightman and Landis
streets.

Until recently, however, the city has had difficulty pinpointing a reliable source of funds for its share of the project.

The possible use of a redevelopment district arose yesterday with unanimous approval of a study area, encompassing parts of City Heights, Normal Heights and East San Diego. If the district were ultimately adopted, increased tax revenues from higher property values could be plowed back into the parks and into other revitalization projects in the same areas.

Deputy City Manager Maureen Stapleton said it will take 12 to 18 months to complete the redevelopment study, which would determine the boundaries of such a district.

The preliminary design for the cover concept and bridge enhancements was adopted on a 6-1 vote, with Bob Filner dissenting. Councilwoman Gloria McColl, who has extensive property holdings in the area, had been cleared to participate in the decision by the city attorney’s office but abstained, at Mayor O’Connor’s urging, when Filner raised accusations of a potential conflict of interest.

The plan calls for interchanges and over-crossings at University Avenue, El Cajon Boulevard and Adams Avenue and for over-crossings at Wightman Street and Orange and Meade avenues. There would be a pedestrian crossing at Monroe Avenue.