Dozens of people packed their belongings into moving vans this past week on 44th Street in City Heights, leaving behind memories and overflowing trash bins.

City trucks tried to keep up with the rubbish, which was knee-deep in parts of the alley behind the apartment buildings: furniture, rotten food, used syringes, cockroaches and other remnants of these tenants' lives. Last week's heat wave only worsened the smell.

On Friday, the day after the city-imposed deadline for residents and business owners to vacate the two-square-block area, it looked like a ghost town. For now.

After workers remove lead paint, asbestos and contaminated soil, these residential and commercial buildings will be torn down this month to make way for a shopping center.

The mall is the last phase of the $100 million Urban Village redevelopment project, aimed at alleviating urban blight. Construction of the mall should be finished by early 2001.

The project also includes a police station, an elementary school, a swimming pool and tennis courts, a library, a theater, a community center and an adult community education center.

Moving hundreds of people out of the neighborhood -- the largest of the three relocation efforts here since the Urban Village project was launched in 1994 -- has been no easy task for the city of San Diego.

Tenants of the 155 apartments and homes and 23 businesses in the neighborhood were sent notices three months ago -- in English and Spanish, if appropriate -- to tell them they would have to vacate. City officials said they used translators to explain tenants' rights to Spanish- and Vietnamese-speaking tenants.

Still, some tenants waited until the very last minute to clear out, and some business owners have refused to accept the city's offers for their properties, saying they are too low.

"My land. My store. We don't want to sell yet," said Chanh "Tony" Cao, a Vietnamese refugee who described the city's offer for his 99 Discount Center on University Avenue as too low. Given an extension to vacate until yesterday, Cao is still looking for a new site.
Officials say vagrants and drug dealers have moved into the area in the past month, prompting police to increase enforcement efforts.

"Anytime that you're acquiring a massive number of buildings and you've got this time frame between when they're vacant and when there's demolition, you've got problems," said Patricia Hightman, assistant deputy executive director for the city's Redevelopment Agency.

City officials said they have been working closely with residential and commercial tenants to try to ensure a smooth transition, to help them find new homes and new locations for their businesses.

Officials said they have distributed lists of available low-rent apartments, but some residents said they still couldn't find one. Temporarily homeless, some of the displaced people said they were going to sleep in their cars. Others said they had to spend their moving money on motels instead of rental deposits.

"We can't speak for the efforts the individuals are making on their own," said John Crayton, a city property agent.

Some tenants were unable to rent new apartments because landlords discovered they had criminal records or were in the United States illegally, officials said.

Some people really didn't want to move out of their homes.

One woman, who called herself Maria Robinson but is listed in city records as Maria Varella, put off moving until she absolutely had to.

The 39-year-old mother of four sat on the floor of her barren apartment Thursday with a bowl of uncooked eggs while her 6-year-old daughter, Gabriella, roller-skated around the bedroom.

Varella's electricity had been turned off and the refrigerator and stove had been ripped out the day before.

She said she would take her children to a taco shop for dinner and then spend the night --- possibly every night until Nov. 15, when her new rented house becomes available --- in their Ford Festiva. The St. Vincent de Paul Village homeless shelter was full, she said.

But city officials said they were surprised to hear that Varella --- or anyone else --- was planning to sleep in a car.

"We were informed that she was moving into a motel," said Lane MacKenzie, who is overseeing the city's relocation effort. He said Varella was given a "moving check" for
$800 on Wednesday and will receive "several thousand dollars" more once she moves into her new place.

The check-cashing store at University and Fairmount avenues is being allowed to stay open until Nov. 15, even though demolition will be occurring all around it.

Most of the other 20 or so businesses along Highland, Fairmount and University avenues were supposed to be vacated by Thursday. Tenants and business owners alike complained about the way the city has handled the relocation.

"They give us a hard time," said Riyadh Alsabak, an Iraqi refugee who owns the California Produce Market. "They don't care about us. We are not happy."

Alsabak said the city offered him $20,186 to buy his fixtures and coolers, which he said was only a fraction of the money he has spent to build up his business in the past few years. City officials said appraisers familiar with those fixtures determined the value. Alsabak is still due some relocation money, MacKenzie said.

Alsabak said he and his employees had to throw out his fresh produce because he had no place else to store it.

Caption: 4 PICS 2 MAPS
1. On the move: Reina Alpisa (foreground) balanced son Miguel, 2, in his stroller and Armida Acevedo held daughter Ofelia, 3, as workers removed a refrigerator left behind by someone vacating a unit at the Sebastian Arms apartments in City Heights. 2. Out the door: California Produce Market owner Riyadh Alsabak threw away unsold food after his last day in business. He said the city didn't give him enough resettlement money for a new store. 3. Trash treasure: Opportunists (left) picked through piles of items that were discarded by City Heights residents, while others packed belongings into trucks for the move into new homes after the city deadline to vacate the two-square-block area. (B-3) 4. Heavy duty: City employee Vladimir Balotsky (left) watched as hired movers hauled away one of several refrigerators left behind at the Sebastian Arms apartments in City Heights. (B-3) 5,6. (Maps) (B-3) 1,2,3,4. PEGGY PEATTIE / Union-Tribune photos 5,6. PETE CHENARD / Union-Tribune
Edition: 1,2,3
Section: LOCAL
Page: B-1
Index Terms: BUILDING ; CITY ; HOUSING ; NEIGHBORHOODS ; POVERTY ; RELOCATION
Record Number: UTS1481891
Copyright 1999, 2007 Union-Tribune Publishing Co.

***Reproduced with permission granted by San Diego Union-Tribune***
Full-text obtained via NewsBank