Her nephew wants the black panther statues, her sister has asked for the art deco lamp, and her daughter has dibs on one of the couches.

"Whatever she don't want, I'm giving it away. (I'll) put it outside with a 'Free' sign on it," said Mary Frances Dixon, surrounded by piles of clothes, her late mother's mattresses, and everything else she's collected over the past decade.

It's almost time for the big move from her 44th Street apartment.

Dixon lives in one of 155 apartments and homes in City Heights that are targeted for demolition in early October.

In their place, a shopping center will be built, the last phase of a $100 million publicly and privately funded redevelopment project launched in 1994.

San Diego city officials are purchasing the apartment buildings and single-family homes, as well as 27 businesses. After they buy the properties, officials notify residents and business owners they have 90 days to move, then help them apply for low-cost housing subsidies and relocation expenses.

As of June 23, the city had either closed escrow or put into escrow about half the 43 properties in the two-square-block area. Dixon's building closed escrow June 2.

The city also went to court asking for authorization to take possession by eminent domain of 25 parcels within the area whose owners had not responded to the city's offers or had made counteroffers that the city deemed too high.

"We feel we have a real foundation for the values that we have (offered)," said Lane MacKenzie, who is in charge of the city's real estate acquisition and tenant relocation efforts for the project.

This month, the city bought Dixon's 14-unit apartment complex from John Weemes, who lives in Los Angeles. The complex had an assessed value of $674,000, according to county records.

But city officials said the fair market value was only $575,000, much less than Weemes had hoped for.

"It was less than what I paid for the property," he said.
Weemes said he accepted the offer because hiring a lawyer to fight the city would have cost him more money, and he had no guarantee of winning.

"It's just one of those things," he said. "It's the city. What are you going to do?"

Knowing that the end is near, several tenants in Dixon's building have decided to stop paying rent, said Dixon, 48, who has managed the complex for years. One tenant is three months behind on rent, she said.

City officials said these people could be evicted if they don't pay, but added that the city did not buy the properties to turn a profit.

"We won't evict them, definitely," said Patricia Hightman, who is in charge of the project for the city's Redevelopment Agency. "That's very much a last resort."

Tenants who do not pay could risk losing the money the city would pay them to relocate, MacKenzie said.

A couple of weeks ago, Dixon said, a shutoff notice was placed on the front gate of her building by San Diego Gas & Electric Co., saying that the owner had not paid a $364 bill for outside lighting.

Weemes said he won't pay the bill because he no longer owns the building.

MacKenzie said city officials typically try to take care of such issues during escrow if they are aware of them. "Since we own the building there, then we'd be responsible for the residents' safety," MacKenzie said. "We'll just have to swallow (the bill), reluctantly. We don't want to put anybody in harm's way."

Like Dixon, other residents in the project area will have to pack up to prepare for the upcoming change in their lives.

Two pink mattresses that belonged to Dixon's mother before she died last Thanksgiving were leaning against her kitchen counter recently.

Lately, Dixon said, she has been spending more time in her storage unit, sorting through her mother's belongings.

"I'm talking to her clothes," she said. "I'm talking to her furniture."

Before she finally moves her mother's bed to storage, Dixon said, she might lay it down in the living room and sleep on it one more time.

Dixon's parents used to live down the street in one of the apartment complexes that will be demolished along with hers. Not too long after her mother died, her father had a stroke, so she put him in a nursing home. Some nights, she said as her eyes welled up
with tears, she looks down the street at their old building and thinks about her mother.

Dixon said she plans to stay in her apartment until the last tenant leaves. Then she’s going to Louisiana, Florida and Illinois to visit relatives who attended her mother’s funeral.

"I'm going to miss this place myself," she said.

Caption: 1 PIC
LOSING HOME IS MOVING EXPERIENCE, Tearful time: Mary Frances Dixon wiped her eyes as she sat in her apartment, surrounded by a decade’s worth of possessions and memories. She and they will have to go. The building where she lives and works as manager is to be demolished early in October. PEGGY PEATTIE / Union-Tribune
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