An ambitious proposal to cover five blocks of the planned Interstate 15 extension through City Heights with parks and stores could cause delays that threaten future funding for the project, a California Department of Transportation official said yesterday.

Norm Larsen, deputy district director for CalTrans, told the San Diego City Council that full implementation of the community-supported plan could cause a five-year delay because of the additional environmental studies and land acquisition that would be needed.

He said that could result in the loss of $80 million in construction funding already targeted for a less ambitious I-15 project in the state Transportation Improvement Plan.

"There is a potential that those funds will be reassigned to another project," he said.

Larsen’s warning came as the council reaffirmed its conceptual endorsement of the proposal and created a task force to work on its details. Called "A Vision for the Future," the proposal seeks to revitalize the eight-block section of the 40th Street corridor where the freeway extension is planned.

The proposal, with an estimated price tag of $280 million, would nearly double the cost of the freeway project CalTrans has proposed. The five blocks of covered freeway would be the site of parks, town squares, transit stations, public buildings and other amenities.

In addition to the City Council, the proposal is backed by members of the San Diego delegation in Congress and the Legislature.

Under the CalTrans plan, no more than two blocks of the freeway would be covered. The 2.2-mile segment of roadway is the last portion of I-15 to be built in the San Diego area. The freeway will be 25 feet below ground level through the Mid-City area.

Construction of the underground freeway is aimed at ending tie-ups where Interstate 15 ends and traffic spills onto 40th Street.

Deputy City Manager Severo Esquivel told the council that CalTrans has assured him that construction of the freeway extension’s first phase, scheduled to begin in January, will not conflict with the more ambitious community-backed plan.

At the request of Councilman John Hartley, the council directed the city staff to get a
statement in writing to that effect from CalTrans.

"Frankly, if those details are not handled, I will do everything I can to stop that freeway," said Hartley, whose 3rd District includes City Heights and the Mid-City area.

Ever since the freeway extension was proposed about 25 years ago, residents and city officials feared that it would divide the community.

Hartley and neighborhood leaders expressed concern that CalTrans has accelerated its construction schedule by six months and could preclude certain proposals in the community-backed plan, such as mass-transit facilities and bike lanes.

Hartley asked for, but then withdrew, a request for a six- to nine-month delay in the construction schedule in order to form a redevelopment district that would help fund the more ambitious freeway plan, and to seek federal funding.

A congressional committee yesterday approved $8.4 million for the project. The money would be part of a $153 billion transportation bill conditioned on a nickel-a-gallon increase in the federal gas tax, which the Bush administration opposes.

CalTrans' Larsen said the problem was not with the $6 million first phase of the project, but the more extensive second and third stages.

He said the CalTrans version of the freeway is slated for full funding by the state.

Copley News Service reporter Mark Z. Barabak also contributed to this report.