Mid-City fights growing pains, seeks new plan

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The once thriving Mid-City, plagued by overcrowded schools, a lack of parks and clogged traffic, now is the fastest-growing area in San Diego.

The City Council tomorrow night will hold a special meeting to address an extensive overhaul of the Mid-City Community Plan, designed to put the best face back on the aging but vital community.

The area is governed by an outdated plan, says Councilwoman Gloria McColl, who represents the chunk of territory bounded by Park Boulevard, 50th Street, Interstate 8 and State 94.

Its neighborhoods include Kensington, Kensington-Talmadge, Normal Heights and North Park, and parts of Golden Hill, Hillcrest, University Heights and Talmadge Park.

Just as deterioration of downtown spurred an exodus from Mid-City, downtown's revitalization is bringing people back, McColl said.

The is desirable because it is "flat and close to everything," she says.

In line with goals of the city's growth management policy, developers aren't assessed high fees to build there, and the area finally called for a moratorium on all multifamily building until problems of extensive development were solved.

The council this year dramatically increased park fees to assert some control.

Yet, while development and population expanded, "We had schools half the size of those in other areas and parks just plain weren't thought of," McColl said. A study showed that it would take $174 million and require displacing 2,500 people to fulfill the area's park needs.

Thus a Mid-City Select Committee and School Board Task Force have been working on options ranging from expanding school sites for possible joint use as community park sites in summer to covering a freeway extension along 40th Street with a park.

A goal of the new Mid-City plan is to encourage good development through restrictions, McColl said.

The plan also includes a proposed ordinance requiring a special interim permit for new commercial construction in the area, and discusses open space, ways to improve transportation and ways to revitalize commercial and housing development.

It includes design guidelines similar to those used in downtown's redevelopment projects.

If the plan isn't adopted -- it sailed unanimously through the Planning Commission -- a moratorium on construction will be discussed by the council Dec. 11. McColl labeled that "a sword hanging over our head," and said there will be "no need for it" if the Mid-City plan
The meeting to discuss the new plan is scheduled for 7 p.m. tomorrow at the East San Diego Presbyterian Church, 5202 Orange Ave.

Perhaps the most vigorous opposition to the plan has come from Save Our Canyons Inc.

"The Mid-City area has not gotten a great deal of attention from the city," and El Cajon Boulevard has become "a little shabby," said David W. Jacobs, co-chairman of the group.

Jacobs said the group is concerned about the proposed expansion of the freeway at 40th Street and State 15 to nine lanes. Jacobs said the road at that point should be no more than a four- to six-lane freeway, with no truck traffic and a cover -- "literally a lid over the freeway." The space on the cover could be developed into parks, housing and a community center, he said.

"We proposed a redevelopment district to put a cover on the freeway bed ... with an eight-acre park.

"What we have proposed requires some imagination, daring and vision. ... You can't resolve the problem of smooth transportation through a city and leave the city intact unless you do some unusual things."

The group proposes revisions to ensure that the cover is built and what its design would be. McColl says the design of the cover will be brought before the council in June.

"We all agree that covering the freeway is the way for it to be developed, but cost raises its ugly little head," McColl said. For a six-lane cover it will cost $60 million, and for eight lanes, $115 million, she said. A task force is studying the plans, she said.

Related to school expansions and park space, McColl's district was given federal funds for expansion of the Adams Recreation Facility, Central Elementary School and the City HeightsRecreation Community Center.

Meanwhile, the School Board Task Force has called for redesigns of four schools, which may or may not occur, she said. It did find money to paint and maybe landscape, she said, and has $50,000 for site studies.

"The emphasis is that schools should make more of an impact in the community," McColl said, suggesting that community centers could be right on school sites.

"I really see the Mid-City area as the future new area of the city of San Diego," she said. "With the rebuilding of the downtown area, people will want to live close to their work. As traffic increases, they won't want long commutes.

" ... You can't have one area of any city deteriorating, because it drags and draws on the rest. ... I think that the city has an obligation to make public facilities as nice and abundant as it possibly can."

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