Businessman Sol Price has given $7.2 million to the San Diego Foundation, raising his total donation to the charity to more than $17 million over the last six years.

The gift makes the 82-year-old Price one of the top three benefactors to the organization and exemplifies the philanthropist's emphasis on community causes, said foundation President and CEO Bob Kelly.

"Sol is an entrepreneurial philanthropist," said Kelly. "Most philanthropists say, 'Here's the money, do good with it.' He comes up with ideas. He's easily the most active philanthropist I've ever run up against, and not just through the foundation."

The full extent of Price's philanthropy in San Diego is difficult to determine because Price, who founded Fed Mart stores and the Price Club discount warehouses, now Costco, keeps a low public profile. He would not discuss his philanthropy for this story, and his aides are reluctant to talk about his philanthropic endeavors.

But he has made other sizable grants through Price Charities and has worked behind the scenes getting others to donate to local causes, including contributions to the San Diego Symphony.

In 1983, he established the Price Family Charitable Fund, which has assets in excess of $70 million.

All this not only makes him one of San Diego's major philanthropists, but puts him in such select local company as McDonald's heiress Joan Kroc and The San Diego Union-Tribune publisher Helen K. Copley.

This latest gift could be used in any number of ways, said San Diego Community Foundation spokeswoman Cindy Ribant. "Wherever the need is, Sol will be putting his money," she said.

A $10 million gift Price gave to the foundation previously has been used primarily to revitalize City Heights, a multiethnic inner-city neighborhood, and for scholarships to encourage youths to pursue careers in the retail and service industries.

The New York-born Price, who went to San Diego High School, has a special affinity for City Heights, and that has been the focus of much of his philanthropy lately.

Price's involvement with City Heights stems from his ties to former Councilman William Jones, head of CityLink Investment Corp., who has pushed to get both the public and
private sectors to invest in the community.

Jones said Price would often accompany him to people’s homes in City Heights for an exchange of ideas.

"Sol and I would meet with people in their living rooms," Jones said. "We’d have coffee and talk about our hopes and dreams for the future of our city and what could be done to make them come true. He helped the residents (of City Heights) in creating a vision about their community."

But it is not so much Price’s money as his entrepreneurial spirit that has been the driving force behind his philanthropic achievements, say those who know him.

Among the ideas the foundation has implemented for Price:

[] The San Diego Foundation City Heights Loan Fund, which provides interest-free loans of up to $10,000 to first-time homeowners and home-improvement loans for current homeowners. Borrowers can pay down their interest rates through community service.

[] The San Diego Foundation Sol Price Family Fund, which supports the Community School Innovations Program. It runs after-school enrichment and recreational programs and an extended-day program at Monroe Clark Middle School as well as a program that helps parents improve the quality of life for their families.

City Councilwoman Christine Kehoe calls Price "an investor in people."

"He expects results, and he monitors results," Kehoe said. "When he writes a check, it's only the start of his involvement."

Kehoe, whose 3rd District includes City Heights, helped secure $22 million in local and federal financing for the City Heights Urban Village. The redevelopment project includes a new $5.2 million library paid for by Price, a Head Start center, tennis courts, a swimming pool and a police station.

"We wanted to name (the library) for the Price family, but he was adamant: 'No!',' said Kehoe aide Myrna Zambrano.

The project also includes retail and commercial space, with development funds raised by Jones and CityLink.

As part of his commitment to City Heights, Price paid the salary of the new principal of the Rosa Parks Elementary School for more than a year before it opened in September, Zambrano said. And he will continue to pay the salary of the City Heights Town Council's executive director until at least next year.

Price’s other local philanthropic efforts over the last decade include:
June 1997: $1 million to San Diego Neighborhood Housing Services to aid low-income, elderly and disabled homeowners and renters in City Heights.

May 1997: $4 million endowment for the Price Scholarship Fund, available to graduates of Crawford, Gompers, Hoover, Lincoln, Morse and San Diego high schools. The money is what remains of a 1989 grant to the former San Diego College of Retailing.

February 1995: An undisclosed sum to help start the Neighborhood Development Bank of San Diego.

March 1991: Aaron Price Fellows and Scholars program, in memory of grandson Aaron Price, 15, a 10th-grader at Point Loma High School, who died in 1989 after long battle with cancer.

September 1991: San Diego School of Success, experimental preschool through kindergarten in Golden Hill.

April 1990: $1 million to San Diego Hospice.

November 1990: $1.8 million to endow chair in USD's Center for Public Interest Law.

April 1989: $2 million for new student center at UCSD.

Price has demonstrated a special concern for the younger generation. He attended an awards ceremony Saturday hosted by the San Diego Foundation to honor 99 new high school graduates who shared more than $312,000 in grants.

Twenty-eight of them received $4,500 each from the Price Scholarship Program, which combines academics at San Diego City College with mentors and on-the-job experience at one of three sites -- Costco Wholesalers, the San Diego Convention Center and the Town & Country Hotel.