Neighborhood is hitching dreams to ambitious plan
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The most challenging problems require the most creative solutions. Case in point: City Heights, one of San Diego's oldest -- and most challenging -- neighborhoods.

City Heights neighbors, city officials and a private developer are facing the challenges together and have come up with a creative way to finance and build a lively urban village at the heart of the community.

Their hopes run high that the new life will spread outward and revitalize all of City Heights.

It has been called the city's crossroads because of its location in the middle of San Diego, surrounded by the neighborhoods of North Park, Kensington and Skyline and, farther to the east, the cities of La Mesa and Lemon Grove. These days, City Heights is at its own crossroads. Its streets are lined with aging homes protected by iron bars, its businesses interspersed with bars of a seedier sort. Church-sponsored kitchens serve meals to lines of people.

The crime rate is one of the city's highest; the percentage of people who own their homes, the city's lowest. And the median income barely has budged since World War II, leaving 30 percent of City Heights' 70,000 residents below the poverty line.

"It's difficult to stimulate business investment and homeownership when people are concerned about personal safety," said Howard Wayne, president of the Mid-City Development Corp., a nonprofit agency that designs economic strategies for the area.

To turn City Heights around and rebuild this rotting core of San Diego will take creativity not often found in the offices of bureaucrats or in the minds of well-meaning community activists.

Not that there aren't plenty of people living and working in City Heights who are ready, willing and able to take a stand against the growing blight.

Their energy and commitment can be found throughout the community -- in the front yard of a 43rd Street home with its harvest-colored mums, in the pages of a recent study by a citizens' advisory group about how to combat crime and boost business in City Heights.

But what they don't have is the $3 million in seed money needed to begin the construction of a police substation -- the cornerstone of their dreams to build an urban village in the heart of City Heights.
Those who live here envision a community hub where children can play safely and residents can hold town meetings. They see new, thriving businesses and homes occupied by owners rather than renters.

The solution to their cash crunch may lie with a former San Diego City Council member who says he can do what city officials and area residents cannot -- get things built and stimulate investment in the area.

William Jones grew up in the Skyline and Encanto neighborhoods of San Diego. After working for County Supervisor Leon Williams, he ran for office himself and became a City Council member.

In 1987, he left to get an MBA from Harvard Business School, then went on to handle a $400 million portfolio for Prudential Investment Corp. in the Bay Area.

Return of a native son

Now Jones is back in town with a plan for revitalizing downtrodden inner-city sections of San Diego. Through his firm, CityLink Investment Corp., Jones plans to get the public ball rolling with a push from private money.

His initial financial backing is $6 million from Price Club founder Sol Price for a proposed eight-block urban village bounded by University Avenue and 43rd, 45th and Landis streets.

Jones then plans to broaden his financial base, possibly selling shares in his private company to investment clubs made up of area residents, many of whom could not come up with the cash for a down payment on their own homes.

By owning a stake in CityLink's portfolio of public and private properties, City Heights shareholders would own a stake in their own community and could share in any profits as well.

But Jones will need more than mom-and-pop investors to create the urban village. The ambitious project is expected to cost at least $65 million and could take four years to complete.

Jones said he hopes Sol Price's backing and an early success with the police substation will encourage other corporate and individual investors.

Until he's proven the CityLink approach, Jones is careful not to tout his ideas too much.

"People who live in areas like City Heights so often have big dreams, and when they don't happen, they get very let down," Jones said. "I want to inspire individual responsibility and create opportunities for improvement, but I also try to manage
expectations."

Tiny steps

Jones is focusing on helping City Heights move forward one step at a time. The first order of business: the much-needed police substation.

Early this month, Jones struck a development agreement with the city that has CityLink funding construction and overseeing the rehabilitation of a former Vons building at the corner of 43rd and Landis streets, to turn it into a police substation. The city will reimburse CityLink when the substation is finished.

With CityLink absorbing the risk by fronting the money, city officials could hardly say no. But they still had to come up with funds to pay back CityLink.

Council members Christine Kehoe and Judy McCarty, who share the City Heights district, did just that by rearranging priorities and committing some of their discretionary federal grant money to the project.

Jones received unanimous City Council approval and enthusiastic backing from hundreds of City Heights residents because he laid a careful foundation of cooperation and concern.

Over the past year, he hosted focus groups with local residents and business people to find out their concerns -- and their dreams. He found that while many did not have much cash, most wanted to have ownership in their community.

He also won over City Heights residents by placing a handful of them on his company's board of directors.

"CityLink's involvement has made this project possible," said Patricia Hightman, director of the city's Redevelopment Agency. "This project shows how government, private industry and residents have to work together. No one can do it alone."

The new police substation will take up most of the 30,000-square-foot Vons building. But room will be left over for an 11,000-square-foot public gymnasium, as well as offices for Park and Recreation Department employees and community meeting rooms.

From the detective's area in the building's southeast corner, large windows will look out on Landis Street Park, a flat grass expanse with picnic benches, a play yard for children and basketball courts.

To reinforce the 24-hour police presence, one of the windows will extend up and over the top of the building, creating a beacon effect. San Diego stage-lighting consultant Tim Becker came up with a design using colors and forms to create a sculpture of sorts out of the building.
"The substation lighting will be functional and will emphasize the nighttime presence of police, but it will also bring much-needed art to the neighborhood," said project architect Tony Cutri of Martinez, Cutri & McArdle Architects.

The maroon-and-gold substation -- designed in a jazzy, retro-modern style to fit with public facilities and businesses along University Avenue -- will be a far cry from the existing police storefront, in a tiny pale-green house with bars on the windows at the corner of Landis and Highland streets.

The substation will be further spruced up with expanded parking, a fueling station and car-wash facilities if the second phase goes forward.

The City Council is set to decide Dec. 6 whether to buy the dozen homes, auto-repair shop and martial-arts studio just north of the Vons building so CityLink can expand the substation.

If that is approved, the city will help those living and working in the area relocate, most likely with help from federal grant money, Hightman said.

Just two blocks away is land already acquired by the city, where Rosa Parks Elementary School will be built by 1997. The school already was on the drawing board, but Jones said he wants to include it in plans for the eight-block urban village.

**Getting a chance**

CityLink has an agreement with the city to develop a master plan for the urban village by early next year. Plans are likely to include an adult education center, commercial retail property for banks, shoe-repair and dry cleaning businesses, a pharmacy, a coffee shop, an ice-cream parlor and an expanded park to include tennis courts and a swimming pool.

"People say these kids don't play tennis, these kids don't swim," Jones said. "I say if they had a pool and tennis courts, they would. A first-class development would give them a chance."

It is unusual for a private company such as CityLink to target a neighborhood for revitalization and invest so much time and money in creating public facilities, redevelopment expert Hightman said.

Usually, community-based organizations and nonprofit charities form the public-private partnerships that get most redevelopment projects off the ground.

Jones said he's always thought targeting inner-city neighborhoods made good business sense -- for the city's health and for his company's potential profit.
"City Heights has the potential to decline to the point of becoming San Diego's South Central Los Angeles," Jones said. "That decline would cast a huge shadow over surrounding communities, destroy the tax base and create an unfriendly business environment.

"By taking action now, we can put the area on track and create profitable business opportunities."

But before businesspeople can move in, criminals must be pushed out. A number of groups have come together to do the pushing, including the City Heights Neighborhood Coalition, Project Clean, San Diegans for Safe Neighborhoods and the City Heights Improvement Partnership. Plans for the police substation have encouraged them to push harder.

"We're finding a whole new side to ourselves because of the CityLink project," said Sharon Wilson of San Diegans United for Safe Neighborhoods. "We all had narrow vision trying to keep our own pet projects going.

"Now we're all working together and working well with the city. That's how we'll win."

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Caption: 3 PICS 1 MAP
1. Breaking ground: CityLink's Steven Paull (left) and William Jones at future site of police substation in City Heights. 2. Mid-City style: Architects designed a maroon-and-gold police substation in retro-modern style to fit with public facilities and businesses along University Avenue. 3. Native son: Backed by $6 million from Sol Price, William Jones is taking on one of the biggest challenges of his life - revitalizing City Heights. (H-7) 4. CITY HEIGHTS VILLAGE (H-7) 1,3. Union-Tribune / GERALD McCLARD 2. Rendering / Martinez, Cutri & McArdle Architects 4. SOURCE: City Heights Community Development Corp., UNION-TRIBUNE

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Column: CITY HEIGHTS AT A CROSS ROADS
Correction: CORRECTION A map that appeared last week with a story on the City Heights redevelopment area incorrectly identified the western boundary. It should have been shown at 43rd Street. Also, the map should have shown the proposed San Diego Police Department substation at the corner of 43rd and Landis Street, not Fairmount Avenue and Landis. The San Diego Union-Tribune regrets the error. (941204, H-3)

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