

Gardens may replace city blight

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In the next few months, flower and vegetable gardens are expected to sprout along a two-acre strip on 40th Street in City Heights that not too long ago was a center of blight and crime.

California Department of Transportation officials, who were joined by city and community leaders at a press conference yesterday, said arrangements are being worked out to temporarily allow the property between University and Polk avenues to be used for a hundred family-tended garden plots. In the future, more land may be available for gardening or other uses.

The land is in the right-of-way of the planned Interstate 15 corridor through City Heights. Construction is scheduled to begin in 1993.

Much of the land has been cleared away. But delays this year in demolishing many of the 200 boarded-up homes and apartment buildings north of University Avenue caused drug dealers, gang members and transients to move into the area.

Standing near freshly bulldozed rubble of one of the structures, community activist Frank Gormlie said resulting crime and arson fires in the buildings spawned widespread complaints from residents and business people.

"It's been a blighted appearance for the community," Gormlie said. He said a community rally two months ago got CalTrans' attention and the demolition work has speeded up.

CalTrans spokesman Jim Larson said just 13 buildings remain in the section of freeway right-of-way south of El Cajon Boulevard. Larson said CalTrans hopes to have those structures cleared away in another month or so.

CalTrans is hiring a private security company in an effort to keep crime down in the remaining structures -- and others the agency is still purchasing in the right-of-way north of the boulevard, said District Director Jesus Garcia at the site yesterday.

Garcia said two unarmed guards will be on duty from 3 p.m. to 7 a.m. to protect the vacant properties until they are torn down.

Acknowledging CalTrans' cooperation, City Councilman John Hartley said the agency "has become good neighbors. ...We need to continue that and work together."

Residents, who wanted police foot patrols in the crime-ridden area, yesterday welcomed the security guards, but were most excited about the garden project.

"When you come in and see a lot of vacant land and burned out buildings, it doesn't make you want to move here. It doesn't make you want to start business here. It's been very detrimental to the community," said 44-year-old Karen Grimmer, who lives four blocks from the right-of-way away and is a community volunteer.

Grimmer said many residents figured the freeway "would start to happen right away" once the buildings were boarded up and torn down.

"That wasn't the case. We're looking at a bad situation here. It looks better without the buildings, but it's still a lot of vacant land and still could possibly be a fire hazard," she said.

Gormlie, who said a groundbreaking ceremony for the community garden project will be held next Saturday, said the two-acre area will be fenced and that participating residents will have keys to enter and tend their 10-foot-square plots.

There will be 100 plots initially, Gormlie said, with possibly more to be added later. He said additional land could be used for soccer fields or other recreational purposes.

The I-15 corridor, costing an estimated \$121 million, will be an eight-lane freeway constructed 25-feet below street level and run between 40th Street and Central Avenue through City Heights.

Although the first phase is not scheduled to begin until 1993, the agency hopes to start it sooner, Larson said.

Caption: 1 PIC

CalTrans spokesman Jim Larson stands in front of cleared land that will soon turn into garden plots for residents. (Eds. 5,6) The San Diego Union/Jerry Rife
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