Urban village project is proposed for City Heights
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The heart of City Heights might be infused with some new blood.

An expanded park and recreation center, a police station and a slew of stores might be erected in City Heights under a proposal proffered by a corporation seeking to invest in one of San Diego's oldest and most crowded neighborhoods.

Currently, an eight-block area bordered by University Avenue, 45th Street, Landis Street and 43rd Street is an amalgam of apartments, small businesses and small single-story homes.

Beginning this year, an investment company focusing on inner-city redevelopment wants to create an urban village in City Heights that will attract people and be a place they feel safe, said William D. Jones, president of the Citylink investment corporation and a former San Diego city councilman.

The first phase of the proposed urban village would convert a former Vons supermarket on Landis Street into a police station for the Mid-City area -- a 24-hour facility that would base officers closer to the area they patrol. The San Diego Police Department has been working to establish a station in the area.

Citylink officials have proposed spending up to $6 million to convert the supermarket into the police station.

The overall redevelopment project is in its genesis. It will move forward next week if the City Council votes to accept certain terms for Citylink financing and other development responsibilities.

Citylink also wants authorization from the city to develop a master design and financing plan for the eight-block area.

Councilwoman Christine Kehoe, whose district includes City Heights, said she was excited about possibly working with the investment corporation.

"There are definitely concrete possibilities to revitalize this neighborhood in spectacular ways. The end result could be something that helps significantly rebuild City Heights," she said.

Jones estimated that the entire project could be completed by 1998, if nothing arises to delay financing or construction. The total project could cost $65 million.
Jones' San Diego-based investment firm got its primary financial backing from entrepreneur Sol Price, founder of The Price Club. Jones said Citylink would like to work in other inner-city neighborhoods and plans to create investment opportunities for residents of those neighborhoods, which would give residents a stake in the project's outcome.

The urban village proposal, should it move forward, would join some other redevelopment and construction projects in the City Heights area. A new elementary school will be built on Landis Street near Chamoune Avenue, adjacent to the area Citylink proposes to develop. In two other areas of City Heights, the Mid-City Redevelopment Corp. is trying to improve living conditions in some apartment complexes.

The Citylink proposal does not run counter to other projects in the area, said Lew Pond of the Mid-City Redevelopment Corp. "There's nothing in what Citylink is proposing that would be inconsistent with what we're proposing," Pond said.

Public-private partnerships for redevelopment projects are not new in urban areas. But, those efforts usually combine community-based organizations and nonprofit charities as opposed to companies targeting specific neighborhoods, said University of San Diego Professor Mark J. Riedy, whose expertise is in real estate finance.

Jones said, "I think that traditional redevelopment approaches applied to older urban areas do not by themselves create sustainable revitalization. Those efforts do not create significant ownership opportunities for people who live in the communities being served."

The Citylink development could eventually uproot residents and businesses in the area, officials said.

Raul Aguilar could be one such person. Aguilar and his wife have rented a home on 43rd Street near Landis Street for two years. He said he sees some of the benefits of the proposed development.

"Change is good for the neighborhood. They really need some changes around here," he said.

But he sees another side as well. He said he likes the space that his one-story home affords his four children and that it might be hard to find a comparable site elsewhere.

"I don't know if it's the right thing making all the people leave. For us, we'd be giving up a lot."