Forum seeks a vision for City Heights
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Pete Contreras strode into the middle-school cafeteria yesterday as one member of an ad hoc group charged with laying a foundation on which to build a better City Heights -- one of San Diego’s most troubled neighborhoods.

Quite a task. And Contreras, a local pastor, and about 100 other people in the group have one weekend to do their work.

"I'm glad they're doing something," said Contreras, who is known as Pastor Pete to many of the area youth.

"Let's make an effort to make a difference," he said.

Contreras and the rest of the brain trust -- which includes judges, social workers, educators and politicos from all over the region -- converged on Wilson Middle School for the start of a forum that ends tomorrow afternoon.

The attendees will suggest ways to cut crime and boost business in City Heights as they meet with residents and business owners from the area, many of whom say their neighborhood is saddled with more woe and less help than it deserves.

"Our challenge is to come together and put a vision down on paper," said Paul Osuna, a City Heights resident and participant in the forum.

"I'm encouraged this is taking place," said Osuna, echoing a sentiment from several others at the forum, dubbed the City Heights Economic and Crime Summit.

The daytime agenda of the so-called summit includes discussions, brainstorming, neighborhood tours and speeches that will focus on issues including education, economic development, housing, crime, and health and human services.

And at night? The participants are expected to sleep on cots in Wilson's classrooms, a move intended to keep people's minds focused on the area and task at hand.

A bus tour of the neighborhood last night served to underscore the diversity of the area, as well as why the participants have assembled.

Many area stores are "marginally profitable and business turnover is common," according to an informational booklet produced by the city of San Diego for the forum. City Heights continues to be burdened with one of the highest crime rates in the city, even though the neighborhood saw a dip in overall crime last year, police said.
Forum organizers said they hope City Hall will pay close attention to whatever ideas emerge from the forum. They have one proponent in their corner: Councilwoman Christine Kehoe, whose district includes City Heights.

There are no illusions, however, that this weekend will produce a panacea for all that ails City Heights, said one of Kehoe's staff members, Neil Hyytinen.

This weekend "will be a jump-off point," said Hyytinen, who helped coordinate the forum. "What's important is the process itself."

As the meeting was gearing up, participants said they hoped their ideas would not die on the vine or get stalled in a maze of bureaucracy.

"The follow-through is going to be real important," said Jay Powell, executive director of the City Heights Community Development Corporation, a nonprofit organization designing economic strategies for the area. "At some point, you have a strategy and get going on it."

Mayor Susan Golding, in a speech at the opening of the forum, said, "I'll be more than interested to see the recommendations and will work with Kehoe to do what I can for City Heights."

Kehoe said she wants to present the weekend's strategies to the City Council as soon as possible. She said she first wanted the area's community groups to review and comment on the recommendations that come out of the forum, a process that may take two or three weeks.

Although encouraged by improvements in the area such as the start of neighborhood policing, City Heights Partnership -- a 4-year-old community group -- began last year to plan the meeting and to organize with other community groups and the city.