A ragged swath of weeds running one mile along 40th Street serves as a community garden, playground, parking lot and trash dump.

The desolate land is everything, it seems, except what state transportation officials plan for it to be: the final section of Interstate 15. The state has planned for decades to run an eight-lane freeway through City Heights beside 40th Street, completing an interstate that reaches to Montana.

But money woes and fights over design have delayed the project, which was first proposed when Dwight D. Eisenhower was president.

Now it might be delayed again because state transportation officials are giving top priority to strengthening overpasses and bridges against earthquakes. This means work on hundreds of other projects throughout the state, including I-15, could stop for up to three years, some local officials and residents fear.

"I think we've waited long enough," said Leota Green, who has lived along the proposed freeway path for 24 years. "Our neighborhood needs to get back to normal," the 55-year-old school cafeteria worker said.

About 100 of Green's neighbors, business owners and local politicians held a rally yesterday, urging the state to stick to a construction schedule that would wrap up the $150 million project in 1998.

"To live here feels like a nightmare that you never wake up from," said City Heights resident Karen Manley.

Some of the thousands of cars that use 40th Street to reach existing ends of Interstate 15 served as a backdrop to the rally on Wightman Street.

State transportation officials said the project might be put on hold because they have little money.

"We agree Interstate 15 is important, but the fact of the matter is we don't have enough resources to do everything," said Jim Drago, a spokesman for the California Department of Transportation.

Strengthening freeway overpasses and bridges, called earthquake retrofitting, has become the top priority because of deadly temblors in Northern California in 1989 and in Los Angeles this year, Drago said. More than 70 bridges and overcrossings in San
Diego County will be strengthened.

Caltrans suffered a setback in June after voters rejected a bond measure that would have provided $950 million for retrofitting.

State transportation officials and representatives of municipalities across the state will meet this summer to determine which projects get money and what priority they will receive.

Local officials argue that delaying the interstate project will endanger some City Heights-based projects meant to revive the economically depressed area. They said a freeway would help generate interest and money for a retail development on University Avenue proposed by an investment corporation, Citylink.

"We're just starting to turn the corner in City Heights, and delaying I-15 can derail momentum we're making," said Councilwoman Christine Kehoe, whose district includes City Heights.

Others said the state is going overboard with its laser-like focus on retrofitting.

"You don't want your bridges falling down, but maybe there are some other projects that you can do along with that," said Lee Hultgren of the San Diego Association of Governments.

Anti-freeway sentiment lives in a few area residents like Roger Utt. "Who in their right mind would want a freeway to go through their neighborhood?" the Kensington resident asked. Utt thinks that if the freeway proceeds, state and local officials should keep in mind other issues in the area, such as public transportation.

"We're going to have increased traffic problems here," he said. "We'll have to take a closer look at how to run (public) transit along University Avenue and El Cajon Boulevard."

The I-15 project, running from Landis Street to Adams Avenue, is in its first stages. A nearly completed overcrossing at Wightman Street is one of the most visible signs of the project. The interstate will run 25 feet below ground level, allowing it to be crossed by most of the streets that currently intersect 40th Street. Transportation authorities plan to cover one square block, between Polk and Orange avenues, to create a park.