Five million dollars has been donated by local retailer Sol Price to wipe away the sorry state of the City Heights branch library -- an aged, leaky, cramped facility.

The gift will go toward building a new, larger library and an adjoining community center in the neighborhood at Fairmount Avenue and Wightman Street.

Planners hope to have the building that will house the library and community center completed by fall 1997.

"It's certainly good news for City Heights and East San Diego," said Christine Kehoe, the city councilwoman in whose district the project lies.

"The East San Diego library underserves the community," Kehoe said yesterday of the small branch which opened in 1964.

Price, who lives in La Jolla, could not be reached for comment yesterday.

He and his family have a history of donating to San Diego area charities and to arts, financial and other organizations. In past years, Price has donated to a bank to serve poor neighborhoods in San Diego, the San Diego Symphony, the Old Globe Theater, various museums, the San Diego Hospice and the University of San Diego School of Law.

His gift to the City Heights library came about because of his interest in seeing the beleaguered neighborhood right itself, according to people close to the project.

"There is a serious need for study space in Mid-City," said Tony Cutri, the architect of the new library. "You go into the little teeny library now and they are waiting in line for computer use and desk space."

Since the 1960s, the City Heights population has boomed, overwhelming infrastructure and facilities in the area. An estimated 70,000 people live in the area and the new library at 15,000 square feet will be able to serve a community that size, said Kehoe, who along with the rest of the City Council voted last month to accept Price's donation.

The library and community center are part of a larger, $65 million plan for the City Heights neighborhood. CityLink Investment Corp., a San Diego-based firm focused on urban renewal, has developed plans for a new police substation -- already under construction -- an expanded recreation center and a string of stores in the
neighborhood. Price provided start-up money to CityLink last year and he has been in regular contact with city officials about progress in City Heights.

The new library branch will become "a homework center, a learning center and a heart of that urban village," said William Jones, the head of CityLink and a former San Diego city councilman.

"The Price family gift represents a major commitment to the residents of the Mid-City community and the gift underscores the importance of creating first-class public amenities in the inner cities," Jones said.

Price's gift for the library represents another positive development for city libraries over the past few months.

Retired Pacific Beach resident Vern Taylor donated about $5 million in August so the city can build a new library in his neighborhood. The City Council approved financing last month and a downtown site for a new central library they hope to open by 1999.

And a City Council committee is discussing ways to finance badly needed maintenance for branch libraries -- possibly through a bond measure -- which could mean about $60 million by next year.