State OKs money for key part of I-15 plan; City Heights welcomes $73.5 million for freeway
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The 40th Street corridor through City Heights is center stage for one of the region's longest running sagas of freeway construction. More than 35 years of quarrels and money shortages have delayed completion of a mile-long section of Interstate 15, resulting in traffic jams and frustrated residents.

Yesterday, state transportation officials allocated $73.5 million for the project, which will allow construction to enter its most critical stage.

The money means that crews may begin working on the eight-lane roadway as early as this summer, and it covers the bulk of the freeway construction.

This is "a big, important chunk" of money, said Kimberley McManus, chief of staff for state Sen. Lucy Killea, who represents the neighborhood.

"This is the heart of the freeway," McManus said.

Plans call for the City Heights section of Interstate 15 to run two stories below ground level and parallel to 40th Street, from Landis Street to Monroe Avenue.

Currently, the freeway reaches from Logan Heights to Montana--except through City Heights, where the freeway funnels about 44,000 automobiles onto 40th Street daily. An abandoned strip of dirt and weeds next to 40th Street will be converted into the last section of Interstate 15 by 1998 if the project goes according to schedule.

News that the freeway project was moving ahead prompted a wide range of reactions among residents and merchants in the area.

"I want it done ASAP," said Victor Nolan, a retired Navy man and homeowner on 40th Street. "If they can just get it done, please."

The on-again-off-again nature of the freeway project has hurt several businesses, some owners complain.

"The effect on my business has been just chaotic; very, very bad," said James McEvoy, owner of McEvoy Music on 40th Street.

When McEvoy moved his business into the area in 1978, his small store thrived.

But to make way for the freeway project many buildings in the area were razed and the
neighborhood took on a ragged appearance.

"The progression has been to have the area worsen, and my clientele have been reluctant to come," McEvoy said.

As recently as last summer, the project looked as if it was going to face another in a series of delays. California transportation officials, in light of deadly temblors in 1989 and 1994, shifted priority to earthquake strengthening projects statewide. That meant projects such as the I-15 undertaking risked being shunted to the bottom of the priority list.

Angry community members, saying they had waited long enough to see the freeway finished, lobbied local and state politicians.

One of those community members was Karen Manley.

"This is the vote we've waited for," said Manley, head of the lobbying group I-15 Now!

Manley and some others in the neighborhood remain wary, though. She has seen many delays.

"We'll believe it when we see it," she said.

Money for the Interstate 15 freeway, coming from federal and state highway funds, will become available after some design plans are completed. Officials said yesterday that they were confident that those plans would be finalized.

The freeway construction in City Heights will lead to temporary detours in the neighborhood as the work progresses, said Kyle Nelson, a spokesman for the state Department of Transportation. A completed overcrossing at Wightman and 40th streets is one of the most visible signs of the project so far.