

When farsighted plans fall short

City Heights still reeling after collapse of the Visions Project

San Diego Union-Tribune – Sunday, June 28, 1992

Author: ED JAHN

In a society often held hostage to the motor vehicle, one San Diego community fought to ease the stranglehold of exhaust fumes, street noise and traffic jams.

However, when the long-delayed extension of Interstate 15 through City Heights was approved in April, the neighborhood was left scarred by a rift deeper than any earth mover could cut.

"It was like standing over an earthquake fault," John Hartley, the councilman whose district includes City Heights, said of the split that preceded the collapse of the Visions Project, a \$70 million plan to build a town center above the eight-lane freeway extension.

"The community was unbalanced. It was getting too emotional. I felt like it was splitting apart," Hartley said.

With CalTrans threatening to push the completion date of the freeway link into the next century if Visions were approved, Hartley swallowed hard and voted against the project.

Not only did Hartley and the City Council kill the plan it previously had endorsed, the 8-1 vote also dropped a previous commitment to cover the freeway for a block between Landis and Wightman streets at the south end of the project.

The aftershocks are reverberating still. Emotions ran so high and in-your-face confrontations became so common that formal mediation is under way to get neighbors talking to each other again.

Meanwhile, Hartley has been politically targeted for dropping his support of Visions. Earlier this month, a residue of the bitterness could be found on the windows of the City Heights Community Development Corp. offices on University Avenue: a picture of a jammed freeway next to an artist's concept of Visions.

Freeway alternatives

The idea of covering the I-15 extension along 40th Street was proposed in 1970, when CalTrans offered that alternative along with tunneling, cutting below the street level or building the freeway at ground level, said Jim Bliesner, who founded the community

corporation in 1981.

Working with community development block grants, the development corporation has a decade-long history of campaigning for street and alley improvements, getting zoning changes to stop multi-unit buildings, erasing graffiti, organizing neighborhood trash pickups, getting hundreds of trees planted and sponsoring a community garden.

Freeway covers were part of a plan drafted by a group of midcity neighborhoods in 1985, with eight full blocks to be covered, Bliesner said. In 1990, at the urging of newly elected Hartley, the community again attacked the freeway problem.

After nearly a year of community input and design work, the Visions Project was unveiled in May 1991 at an unprecedented City Council meeting in City Heights. The concept was endorsed unanimously by the council two months later.

With 3 1/2 blocks of covered freeway as its base, the project called for a town center, rising above the freeway, to include restaurants and shops, a library, a post office and a community center overlooking a town square and village green.

The adjacent blighted neighborhoods were to be incorporated into the project and revitalized. There were plans for a transit station and a community college.

While all of those ideas now are dead, not all was lost in the council vote. In a compromise worked out with CalTrans, the state will use federal highway funds originally allocated for Visions to upgrade six bridges over the freeway, which will be 25 feet below street level as originally planned.

The bridges will be widened to 150 feet, which is wide enough to support pathways, medians and some buildings.

On and off ramps will be redesigned, and CalTrans will construct "hard landscaping" and plant abundant foliage along the 2.2 miles of freeway. The project is scheduled for completion in 1998.

Many residents say City Heights will never be the same, despite the window dressing.

A suburb first

Sixty years ago, City Heights was a suburb of small homes known as the City of East San Diego. The area was annexed in the 1930s.

"Most of the homes were built in that period. California bungalows, little cottages, a real hodgepodge," said David Nelson, chairman of the City Heights Redevelopment Project Area Committee and a real-estate agent.

Until the last decade, the area bounded by Interstate 805 to the west, El Cajon Boulevard on the north, Home Avenue and state Route 94 to the south and Euclid Avenue on the east maintained a sturdy neighborhood identity, Nelson said.

The estimated 70,000 residents of City Heights make up one of the city's most diverse communities: 34 percent Latino, 30 percent Anglo, 18 percent African-American and 15 percent Asian and Pacific Islander, according to 1990 census records.

"What is happening is that people who owned their homes for 40 or 50 years are dying or going to nursing homes, and their homes are not going to owner occupants," Nelson said.

"The people buying the homes are almost exclusively first-home buyers who have lived in similar neighborhoods and are aware of the problems and crime. They stay two or three years and move on, but instead of selling, they rent and become absentee landlords."

A check of the Multiple Listing Service for City Heights showed 160 homes for sale at under \$125,000.

"You can still get a two-bedroom home for \$60,000," Nelson said, but he added that at those prices, many owners would rather use the dwellings for rental income.

The combination of modest rents, absentee landlords and construction of small apartment buildings has resulted in a population density three times that of neighboring Kensington.

There also has been an increase in crime. Prostitutes and drug dealers became part of the street scene, and police helicopters are said to belong to the City Heights Air Force.

Standing as a monument to the decay is the unfinished freeway along 40th Street; some blocks have been razed and others are dotted with abandoned, graffiti-scrawled structures.

Threatened with crime, residents looked for ways to reverse the trend. They thought the Visions project was the answer.

A neighborhood dream

For neighborhood activist Anna Daniels, ethnic and cultural diversity in City Heights constitutes "the American dream," and her "sweet little house" at 45th Street and Polk Avenue is part of the dream.

"Our problem is that too many people move out too fast," Daniels said, adding that 90 percent of the residents in her census tract are renters.

"How do you get people to look out for each other when there is no sense of stability and ownership?" she asked.

"I was upset about the disintegrating infrastructure and heard about Visions. Here was an opportunity to address those needs."

At first, Mary Laiuppa, who owns a home at Chamoune Avenue and University Avenue, thought Visions was a city project. "Then it dawned on me," she said. "Visions was a community project, and it seemed like the city and the state were the reason for the delay."

An educator, she was aware of the plight of Central Elementary School, which is perched next to the proposed freeway on Polk Avenue. Here was a chance to provide open space next to the school.

Neighborhood nightmare

Karen Manley feels strongly about the neighborhood and declining property values, too, but while supporting Visions initially, Manley changed her mind.

"I was never given an upfront story by those people. They had already decided exactly how they wanted things done and you were never really a participant in the decision making," she said.

Manley, founder of "I-15 Now," came to believe the Visions plan couldn't accomplish its goals. What it would do, she said, would be to delay completion of I-15.

"We were upset over the redevelopment plans for blanket use of eminent domain for private purposes," said Manley, who lives at 42nd Street and Central Avenue. "That meant getting fair market value for a home in the blighted area. But who would buy property in an area where there is eminent domain?"

Manley said she learned that many residents felt disenfranchised from both the community development group and the Visions plan itself.

"We were all volunteers and never thought we would win. We just wanted to be heard," she said. "We had everything stacked against us, no political ties, no money. But things started steamrolling."

The final blow

Faced with organized opposition to Visions, the City Council began reconsidering the project.

The thought of becoming liable for a \$70 million project in shaky economic times had an impact, Hartley said. "I didn't have the mayor's office behind this and other council members were afraid it would take (tax) money out of their districts," he said.

"I didn't have the money, I didn't have the votes, and I had a badly split community. The people with the (community development corporation) were seeing it from a little more intellectual point of view. The others were angry and felt rejected.

"I thought the Visions support was a mile wide and an inch deep," Hartley added. "I kept encouraging the (development group) to include the whole community and they just sort of smiled at us."

Bliesner, rejecting arguments that segments of the community had been frozen out of the planning process, said a vocal group of uninvolved and uninformed people saw only short-term threat to their property values.

Then, CalTrans played its ace. Approval of the Visions Project could extend freeway construction by years, said Jesus Garcia, CalTrans regional administrator. There was no way to assure that the construction money would be available in the future.

That meant razed lots, abandoned apartments and decrepit buildings along 40th Street would remain indefinitely. That was the end of Visions.

"CalTrans split the community because it made people think Visions had lied to them. Once that happened, nothing could be said to (save) anything," Laiuppa said. "CalTrans didn't want to set a precedent for similar Visions Projects in other communities."

On the Friday before the council was to vote on the Visions Project, Hartley met some I-15 Now supporters at the home of Martha Murphy, a City Heights community activist.

"We had been trying to meet with him for eight months," Murphy said. "He had been told a majority of residents supported Visions, but most people didn't know what Visions was."

The group convinced Hartley that Visions would not guarantee redevelopment, that the project "didn't make good dollars and sense," Murphy said.

"Hartley ...did a really courageous thing. He did an about-face on something he had fought tooth and nail for," Murphy said.

There have been a couple of unforeseen side effects from the Visions debate.

"If we hadn't stirred the coals, nothing would have moved on the freeway construction. It would still be sitting there. We accomplished the goals of I-15 Now because we got (CalTrans) off the dime," Bliesner said.

"In a way, more people know each other now," said Manley. "There's a lot more interest in what's happening in our community."

****Reproduced with permission granted by San Diego Union-Tribune***
Full-text obtained via NewsBank*