

Gardeners in City Heights hope to sow pride as well as vegetables

San Diego Union-Tribune - Sunday, August 19, 1990

Author: Gali Kronenberg

City Heights residents have watched bitterly as the Interstate 15 right-of-way project transformed 40th Street from a residential neighborhood into a crime-ridden shanty town, and then -- after about 500 houses were cleared away -- into a barren "no man's land."

Yesterday, after years of distrust and ill will, a California Department of Transportation official and area residents planted a symbolic pomegranate tree on the vacant strip where a hundred small gardens will grow until construction of the I-15 extension begins in 1993.

Organizers hope the community garden will foreshadow an even more innovative agreement between CalTrans and area residents to cover the eight blocks of freeway with parks, ponds and playgrounds as some activists propose.

"We've found a creative solution to a problem that has devastated our community," Mike Waters, chairman of the Community Gardens Committee, told about 50 residents, landlords and city officials attending a ceremony for the gardening project yesterday at 40th Street and University Avenue.

The one-acre community garden is only the first step toward putting the vacant land to productive use, said Waters, suggesting that more gardens and a soccer field would follow.

"We rent an apartment and don't have a back yard," said Vu Nguyn, 17, one of 30 people donating \$10 for the opportunity to work a 10-by-10-foot plot.

Some adults signing up for the garden said they want to teach their children how to plant.

"I grew up in an agricultural area and had a garden since I was small. My daughter never gardened before and this will be a chance for her to learn how to grow things," said Maria Resendez, who was accompanied by her daughter, Dulcinea, 10, and mother, Lucina.

Other residents said they don't know how to garden, but the project's offer of free monthly gardening classes seemed like a good place to learn as well as a good activity to share with their children.

"I don't know the first thing about gardening," said Robert Austin, who envisions bringing

the kids along to work in the garden on weekends.

There still are 70 plots available for City Heights residents. Interested gardeners can call the City Heights Community Development at 584-1535 to sign up, organizers said.

Several people said they hope the public garden would sow a safer community as well as resulting in a bountiful harvest.

"I grow a lot of vegetables, so I can help somebody else who is hungry," said veteran gardener Hazel Conner.

Valerie Hoffman and Carol Hartman have lived a block apart for six years but met only recently at a garden planning meeting.

A City Heights landlord, Lincoln Picard, said he saw the project as a way to bring up property values in an area that has deteriorated ever since CalTrans first proposed to build I-15 in the late 1950s.

Jim Bliesner administers a \$175,000 city grant that will fund studies on how to redevelop the eight-block deck between Landis Street and Adams Avenue that they expect to cover the eight-lane freeway, which will be constructed 25 feet below street level.

"Other cities around the country (Phoenix, Boston and Seattle) have faced similar circumstances and found solutions that maintained neighborhoods," said Bliesner.

Many residents said the garden is a first step in invigorating a community that for too long has languished under the shadow of an impending freeway.

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