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Developer pulls out of Baldwin Park downtown project

By Tania Chatila, Staff Writer

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BALDWIN PARK - City officials say Bisno Development Co. is pulling out of a contentious, multimillion-dollar plan to revitalize more than 100 acres of downtown, citing the economic downturn.

The contentious project spurred the formation of a citizens' action group in Baldwin Park and is in part the grounds of a recall campaign targeting three City Council members.

"It's a huge disappointment," Councilman Anthony Bejarano said, "not so much because of the time, money and energy invested in the project - because all of that was worthwhile - but rather because this project was an opportunity for us to address some serious challenges presenting (themselves) to Southern California and the region regarding housing and transportation."

Neither Ricardo Monroy, Bisno's vice president of public affairs, nor John DeClercq, Bisno's vice president and chief operating officer, returned several calls on Thursday.

At Wednesday night's City Council meeting, Mayor Manuel Lozano read a statement that

blamed a faltering economy on the proposed project's failure.

"While disappointing, this news is not a surprise given the condition of today's economy," Lozano said. "The unprecedented economic meltdown has adversely impacted countries, financial institutions, state and local governments. ... As a result, the Bisno Company has advised us our Baldwin Park downtown revitalization project is no longer feasible at this time, based on the deterioration in the housing, commercial and financial markets."

Baldwin Park had been in negotiations with Bisno since December 2006 for the roughly 109-acre project, which was scaled back from 125 acres earlier this year. Proposals called for turning the city's main commercial corridor into a bustling urban village that could have included a new hotel, a charter school and thousands of luxury homes.

Early on, the project drew heavy opposition from opponents who claimed the project would displace hundreds of residents and shut down dozens of businesses.

The Community Alliance for Redevelopment Accountability, or CARA, waged a heavy campaign to thwart the proposal - which members argued as too "grandiose" for the city's socioeconomic base.

In June, local businessman Greg Tuttle, owner of Tuttle's Parts Exchange, filed recall papers against Bejarano, and Councilwomen Marlen

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Garcia and Monica Garcia. Among the grievances listed in the paperwork were allegations Bejarano and Monica Garcia would financially gain from the redevelopment project's approval.

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The city rejected the recall papers based on election code violations, but the effort re-emerged at Wednesday night's City Council meeting, when Tuttle served the paperwork again.

In a recent conversation, Bisno's Monroy said the economic climate was not affecting the development.

Bejarano said Bisno could not secure financing for the project.

"There is no financing for any new retail redevelopment projects, is the word we've been hearing," Bejarano said.

Cruz Baca-Sembello, secretary of CARA, said while she agreed the size of the proposed project was overwhelming, she does see the need for revitalization in the downtown area.

"The vision has been to incorporate everybody ... I would like to see the residents be more involved in making decisions instead of someone coming in from the outside promising a lot of things and then not fulfilling those commitments."

Officials were in the process of circulating an environmental impact report for the Bisno project.

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