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*From the Los Angeles Times*

## EDITORIAL

### This land is whose land?

January 23, 2006

EVEN IF SOMETHING IS legally clean, it can still reek. The city's handling of some South Los Angeles land smells of klutzy fumbling at best, and at worst it is a gross abuse of eminent domain. So far the victims include a local business (or two), city taxpayers, neighborhood residents and a bunch of stray cats and dogs.

For more than two years, entrepreneur Francisco Pinedo has had his eye on the land adjacent to his L.A. Design Center, an 80,000-square-foot furniture showroom that is a bright spot in a financially struggling community. He was planning to buy the land from Vaughan Benz, another furniture maker that has a long, successful history in the neighborhood. But he was blocked by the city of Los Angeles, which had already started proceedings to force out Vaughan Benz so it could build a much-needed animal shelter on the property.

Now, if a city councilman has his way, the city won't build the shelter after all — instead it will sell the land to Pinedo and put the shelter a block away.

To review: The city seizes land for a public purpose, preventing a private business from buying it and forcing out another that was already using it. Now the city is poised to sell the land back to the business that wanted to buy it in the first place.

Obviously, the smart move here would have been for the city to find another site for the animal shelter and let the owners of two successful local businesses work out a deal. But it's too late for that. At this point, probably the best move for the city — or at least the less bad one — is to go ahead and build the animal shelter as originally planned. The switch to a different site would further delay a shelter that is long overdue, and it would add millions to the cost. The neighborhood and the taxpayers should not have to pay for the city's incompetence.

And it's worth noting that all this finagling was expended on behalf of a businessman, Pinedo, who, with his brother, has made more than \$17,000 in campaign contributions to various city leaders, including Bernard C. Parks, the councilman spearheading the effort. Meow.

But this episode raises even deeper questions. Would city voters have approved a bond measure for animal shelters if they thought millions of dollars would be wasted to make one furniture maker move in order to make way for a more politically connected one? Why is it that, when the city really wants to, it can find other land for public needs that doesn't involve squeezing out businessmen who have been loyal to South Los Angeles for decades? And how can voters have confidence that the city will use its power of eminent domain — the seizing of private land for the public good — wisely?

It's hard to see any good, let alone public good, in the city's actions so far.

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