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## Residents say appraisers on project too aggressive

By Tania Chatila, Staff Writer

BALDWIN PARK - Residents living within the boundaries of a proposed downtown project say city officials are ignoring their accusations that appraisers have been too pushy.

The City Council is considering a multimillion-dollar renovation of 125 acres along Maine Avenue and Ramona Boulevard.

Bisno Development representatives - who are in an exclusive negotiation with city officials - are working on plans for 8,000 residential units, 3 million square feet of commercial space, 750,000 square feet of retail and entertainment space, a 300-room hotel and a 1,000-student charter school.

City officials recently began appraising the 81 residential homes within the project area.

But many residents say the process has been unfair, and appraisers trespassed on their properties.

"They tried to intimidate us," said Cruz Baca Sembello, a resident on Clark Street who refused to have her home appraised. "They were forcing their way into people's homes and yards."

City officials contracted four firms for the job - Lidgard and Associates, Integra Realty Resources, Crockett & Associates, Ltd., and The Rice Group, Inc.

The process wrapped up last week and city officials expect to send out offer letters soon.

Chief Executive Officer Vijay Singhal said city officials did hear concerns from residents about forceful appraisers and met with representatives from all the firms.

"They all acknowledged they are professional people," he said, "and they have not done that. But we still made it clear to them that under no circumstances may (they) go on anyone's property without their consent."

Patrick Kellogg, a senior appraiser with Integra Realty Resources, said he personally supervised all the visits his staffers made to Baldwin Park homes.

"There are cases when we entered the property to see if a property owner was there," he said. "If they had an objection for us being on the property, they had the ability to stop us from being there."

Residents said city officials are ignoring their grievances.

"The city doesn't believe us," Sembello said. "They don't care about us. They have their own agenda."

City officials are rushing the project before two pending 2008 state ballot initiatives limiting eminent domain are voted on, according to James Treasure, co-president of the Baldwin Park Business Association, which was formed in opposition to the project.

If passed, The Homeowners Protection Act would restrict city agencies from taking residential property through eminent domain and turning it over to private developers, said Kathy Fairbanks, a spokeswoman for Eminent Domain Reform Now, a California advocacy group.

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Protection Act would do the same, except for commercial and residential properties, said Douglas Johnson, a fellow with the Rose Institute of State and Local Government.

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Neither would restrict eminent domain seizures for public projects, like roadways, he said.

"If you have a blighted, rundown neighborhood, the city can come in and clean it up, but many cities have gone way too far in an effort to gain more (sales tax) revenue," Johnson said. "These measures are a blow back for those cities that have gone too far."

Treasure - and other residents and business owners who would be affected by the project - claim the city is being "hush and hush" because of those initiatives.

"We have not been properly informed," he said, adding that officials are using back-door techniques to get the project approved.

Treasure referred to a January letter from Bisno to Singhal that urges the city to move quickly on the project.

"That letter was part of an open session discussion with the council," Singhal said. "We did not try to hide this."

Mayor Manuel Lozano accused opponents of the project of misinforming residents and scaring them about the what the project would mean.

"We don't even know if this project is even going to occur or not," he said. "Nothing is set in stone."

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