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Cathedral City using eminent domain to revamp downtown

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CATHEDRAL CITY - El Gallito and the Red Tomato fought a public battle last summer with advertising pleas and signature campaigns to hold on tooth-and-nail against Cathedral City's downtown redevelopment wrecking ball.

But behind the landmark restaurants that now get to stay, other story lines are playing out in the city's quest to revamp downtown through eminent domain.

Welcome to First Street, a modest neighborhood of small colorful buildings, where sugar cane grows in yards and close-knit neighbors cook tacos on a grill, laughing and joking in Spanish.

Most in the neighborhood say they expect to eventually be uprooted.

Others are less resigned, and say their properties are worth more than what the city is offering.

Redevelopment Director Janet Davison and City Council members said they can't comment about individual cases under negotiation.

But the latest redevelopment plans, expected to come out at tonight's City Council meeting, include residences and businesses on 23 acres just east of the Civic Center.

Wessman Development and California Development Enterprises Inc. have teamed up to form Cathedral City Town Center Venture for the project.

The plan is to build a mixed-use neighborhood with town homes, an eight-story building, a pharmacy, market, bank, fitness center, bookstore, restaurants, boutiques and a hotel at Palm Canyon Drive and Allen Avenue, said Candace Casey, senior vice president of California Development Enterprises Inc.

Though still in the concept stages, Casey said potential tenants are CVS or Walgreens, and a specialty foods market.

"We are looking for Cathedral City to be an economic development hub," said Cathedral City Mayor Kathy DeRosa.

The expected revenue is not yet known, DeRosa said. The project won't break ground for another three years.

Leonard Gilroy with the Reason Foundation, a Los Angeles nonprofit dedicated to individual liberty and limited government, criticizes the use of eminent domain.

Cities are "displacing existing homes and small-business owners to try to pursue utopian redevelopment schemes that often don't pan out," he said. And they're "sending a message that modest neighborhoods, vibrant business and families that have been there for decades matter less than economic development."

Cathedral City has used eminent domain - the government's right to take private property for public use - since the mid-1990s to make way for high-profile projects that have attracted shoppers and tourists. That lists includes the Town Square, Fountain of Life, Desert IMAX and Mary Pickford theaters and the Pickfair Promenade, said City Manager Don Bradley.

The area used to be a mobile home park.



Omar Ornelas, The Desert Sun

Margery St. Anthony, owner of this nine-unit apartment complex for for 15 years, is expected to reach an agreement with the city, which wants to buy the property for redevelopment.

REDEVELOPMENT PLAN

The mix of residential and commercial development will be north of East Palm Canyon Drive, between Monty Hall and Date Palm drives.

At this point, plans for that area have not been approved, said Michael Braun, vice president of Cathedral City Town Venture LLC, the company putting together the redevelopment plan.

The latest site plans will come before council today

This latest project "will be to benefit the community as a whole," Bradley said.

'Labor of love'

In the heart of downtown Cathedral City, there's a big Central American family.

Some are from Mexico and Honduras; others are from Guatemala and El Salvador.

They make up the social fabric of a nine-unit, low-income apartment complex painted in green, blue, pink and yellow. Many have called this place home since its doors opened 15 years ago.

But the little community will go away when Cathedral City and complex owner Margery St. Anthony reach an agreement to buy out the property for redevelopment.

"They tell me they are going to win no matter what because this is progress, and I understand that," St. Anthony said. "I love Cathedral City, so I want to see it beautiful. But some of it has to go. It's had its time."

The complex is occupied by five families. St. Anthony hand-decorated the building with mosaic tiles, turquoise pebbles, blue picket fences and painted designs.

Some families grow sugarcane and beans in the front of their apartments, and resident Salvador Coreas, 63, maintains many bright petunias in the yard with his landscaping expertise.

A stray, brown-and-white dog has made his home there, too, as the community pet.

"This has been a labor of love for me," said St. Anthony, 65, of Cathedral City. "I hate to see them go."

St. Anthony wouldn't reveal the amount the city has offered, but said she feels it's worth more.

Whatever money she gets will be used as her retirement, and the tenants will be well cared for, she said.

The residents, who all want to look for a place nearby, will get relocation help.

Coreas lives in a two-bedroom apartment with his wife and two adult children.

"I feel very bad," he said in Spanish. Coreas has lived in the complex since it opened. "I have plenty of friends here. I'm accustomed to living here."

But "if they give me a house, it'd be a dream," Coreas said.

'I don't think I deserve this'

Across the street, Pomposa "Maria" Garcia has made her living for the past 14 years inside a tiny building that reads "DRESSMAKER."

There, Garcia runs her business, Creative Cottons & Alterations.

The back door leads to her home - a few steps away - that she's owned for the same amount of time. Her sister rents the other half of the house.

"It's good this way," Garcia said. "I'm happy."

Garcia is upset with what the city offered her, saying it's not enough for her to start over since the housing market went through the roof.

"I feel abused because I am a poor person," a frustrated Garcia said. "I am the only income in the family."

The Cathedral City Redevelopment Agency sent Garcia a letter Sept. 18 offering to buy the two properties for \$450,000 - the fair market value determined by a city-hired appraiser.

According to December and January loan statements Garcia shared with The Desert Sun, she owes about \$406,000 for both properties.

"If they give me \$450,000, what am I going to have to go out?" Garcia said.

She'd have about \$44,000 to get a new home and business in today's challenging real estate market, she said.

Garcia appealed Jan. 16, asking for \$900,000.

Davison wrote back that the amount was far in excess of fair market value.

If Pomposa Garcia feels that \$450,000 isn't the fair market value of her home and business property, "she certainly can hire an appraiser," said the city attorney Duff Murphy.

Garcia also doesn't qualify for residential relocation assistance like others in the area because she didn't move into her home in time. She had been renting it out previously.

Garcia said she wants to hire an attorney, but can't afford it.

"I don't think I deserve this," she said.



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