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SPEAKING OUT IN BALDWIN PARK**Residents oppose development**

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BALDWIN PARK - Property owners rallied against a proposed multimillion-dollar development this week at a forum backing eminent domain reform.

More than 200 residents and business owners attended the meeting Thursday at the Baldwin Park Marriott. It was hosted by the Community Alliance for Redevelopment Accountability, a Baldwin Park-based nonprofit formed in opposition to the city's redevelopment plans for the downtown.

Baldwin Park is in talks with Bisno Development Co. for a 125-acre renovation of its main commercial corridor that could include a new hotel, a charter school and thousands of luxury residential units.

More than 200 businesses and homes face relocation through eminent domain, depending on the outcome of the project and two legislative initiatives - both slated for June - aimed at limiting eminent domain powers.

One of those initiatives, Proposition 98, was heavily pushed by several groups at the forum, including the National Federation of Independent Business/California, the California Alliance to Protect Private Property Rights, the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association and the Institute for Justice.

Proposition 98 would restrict city agencies from taking property through eminent domain and turning it over to private developers.

Marko Mlikotin, president of the California Alliance to Protect Private Property Rights, said the forum was meant to provide information to residents about Baldwin Park's situation and gather support for the proposition.

"The government's power to forcibly seize private property from property owners is unquestionable," Mlikotin said.

He called the Baldwin Park case "one of the most egregious" he'd seen in years.

"The only thing that can save them," Mlikotin said, "is legal reform."

Among the several speakers Thursday was Jeff Rowes, an attorney with the Institute for Justice, which litigates property rights cases.

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Rowes encouraged property owners to protest, make public records requests and create their own records of city actions.

"What Baldwin Park wants to do is replace people of modest means with rich people because rich people have more money," he said. "I think the only realistic chance to save these neighborhoods is through a lawsuit."

A question-and-answer period garnered several heated comments from angry residents and business owners who accused city officials of being evasive about project plans.

"I intend to retire when I'm ready," said Rosalva Breceda, owner of the Maine Avenue Penhmar Beauty Salon, "not when the city says they need that space."

Other residents - some of whom were not from Baldwin Park - told stories of losing their homes through eminent domain.

"What you see here is the heart of Baldwin Park," said James Treasure, president of CARA. "This is just the beginning of our movement."

City officials have refuted claims they've been deceitful and have said their plans will benefit Baldwin Park.

While in support of the project, Councilman Ricardo Pacheco said he believes better communication could make the proposed development less contentious.

"The city itself needs to do its public outreach to get input from the community," Pacheco said. "I think we need to emphasize more inclusion."



Joey Davis, who lost his Los Angeles home through eminent domain, demands Baldwin Park property owners get involved in saving their homes and businesses from seizure for a proposed downtown development during a town hall forum at the Baldwin Park Marriott on Thursday, March 13, 2008. (Staff photo by Tania Chatila)

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