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## VISTA: Member breaks rank with Vista redevelopment panel

Group says colleague is spreading misinformation

**By CIGI ROSS - cross@nctimes.com | Posted: Wednesday, March 17, 2010 7:42 pm**

A member of a Vista redevelopment committee is being chastised by his colleagues for distributing a letter to downtown merchants and homeowners that warns their property may be in danger of being seized by the city.

Jerome Hymes, a member of the Project Area Committee, recently distributed the letter to about 35 downtown businesses alleging the city is trying to "seize private property from unwilling sellers" by using eminent domain. It also states that the city has "no intentions to treat property owners as partners" in the redevelopment process.

Eminent domain is a process that allows a government agency to take private land for public use or development, as long as it pays fair market value as determined by a court.

The letter, dated Feb. 1, is addressed to Vista's Director of Redevelopment and Housing Bill Rawlings, though Rawlings said in a Feb. 4 response that he had never received a copy of the letter until he learned of it through a newspaper reporter.

Rawlings said Hymes misunderstands redevelopment laws and the processes the redevelopment agency must follow.

During a meeting of the committee Monday, Hymes told fellow panel members he was dissatisfied with Rawlings' response and decided to hand out copies of the complaint letter as a way to provide information to downtown property and business owners.

"Sometimes it takes a public to get government or cities to listen," Hymes said. "If other people are asking, maybe you'll see it as important."

Other committee members promptly took Hymes to task for distributing the letter and said it was full of inaccuracies.

"It's a total laundry list of all the urban myths of redevelopment," member David Nilson said.

Janet Puckett, a committee member and executive director of the Vista Village Business Association, called the letter a "scare tactic."

"Going out and scaring these people with information that is incomplete or inaccurate is not what I (as a PAC member) should be doing," she said.

In the letter, Hymes cites the agency's attempt to purchase the Vista Riviera Motel and lease the property to a nearby car dealership, North County Ford. Redevelopment officials are currently negotiating a purchase with the motel owners, who have said they don't want to sell the property, and the City Council authorized the agency to proceed with eminent domain if an agreement isn't reached.

Hymes also said other committee members have an insensitive attitude to property owners who might not want to sell their properties to the agency ---- citing a remark Nilson made at a Jan. 11 meeting to "bulldoze" a property.

"I have a rude sense of humor," Nilson said on Monday. "I didn't really mean it."

"We all understand David was just making a flip comment," Puckett said.

Rawlings said last month that the assertions Hymes is making about redevelopment are simply not correct. He said Vista's redevelopment plan has language that prohibits residentially zoned property from being taken through eminent domain and that the redevelopment agency is required by law to go through several steps, including negotiations with owners and City Council approval, before acquiring a property through eminent domain.

Rawlings said city officials would meet with individual property owners if the city becomes interested in their property.

"This effort has not been surreptitious, but has been very open and transparent," Rawlings wrote in his response letter.

But Hymes said Rawlings' and other members' comments had not eased his concerns.

"I won't accept your statements that (the letter was) inaccurate. I won't say I won't write another letter," Hymes said.

Rawlings said the city will begin unrolling a communication plan in May or June that will give property and business owners more information about redevelopment in the Paseo Santa Fe Corridor.

The redevelopment agency last month sold \$36 million in bonds to begin purchasing property in the corridor, which stretches along South Santa Fe Avenue from Monte Vista Drive in the south to Orange Avenue in the north.

The redevelopment agency plans to purchase parcels that it can bunch together, then sell them to private developers who will construct mixed-use buildings with ground-floor retail topped by offices and condos.

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