



'Ripped my heart out'

Property owner fights city seizure plan

By Tania Chatila, Staff Writer

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The Gudzunus family is currently in eminent domain litigation with the city for a patch of land on Hacienda Blvd that the city wants to develop into a retail center. The Gudzunus' claim the city is being backhanded, undervaluing their property. Victor B. Gudzunus with his Lawyer John C. Murphy March 27, 2008 at the strip mall on Hacienda Blvd in La Puente. (Keith Birmingham/Staff)

LA PUENTE — When Victor Gudzunus purchased a three-acre slice of Hacienda Boulevard 50 years ago, he expected to pass the land on to his boys.

Today, the property faces eminent domain proceedings and a May trial if Gudzunus and the city can't work out a settlement before

then.

"Well they are not very good surgeons," Gudzunus said of La Puente officials. "They ripped my heart out."

City attorneys first filed paperwork with the courts in July to seize the land at 1313-1335 N. Hacienda Blvd., which is home to a strip mall with 13 tenants.

Officials want to build a retail center on the land, as well as on two adjacent sites.

But Gudzunus and his attorney claim officials have "botched" the process

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by undervaluing the land, singling out the property as blighted and failing to properly communicate with Gudzunus.

"I think the city is displaying a lack of experience with eminent domain," Gudzunus' attorney John Murphy said, "a lack of knowledge with how the process works."

In July, a city appraiser valued the land at around \$4 million. Murphy said officials refused to offer more because the property is not conducive to housing.

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But Murphy claims a separate appraiser told Gudzunus the land can accommodate a residential component, and is actually worth more than \$7 million.

Mayor Louie Lujan said he respected the city appraisers' estimates.

"What I think personally is irrelevant in this case," Lujan said. "As a city, we are relying heavily on the analysis of the appraisers."

In a February deposition with Assistant City Manager Gregg Yamachika, Murphy also questioned the city's argument of blight in seizing the land.

"Did you notice any evidence of what laypeople call physical blight?" Murphy said, according to legal documents.

Yamachika responded no, "other than the weeds and the trash and debris that were on the ground in the rear two-thirds of the property."

Gudzunus, a 1961 Bishop Amat High School graduate, said his property has always been well kept.

There is no graffiti, no crime and the property was once pictured in City Hall as an example of the kind of development officials wanted in La Puente, Gudzunus said.

Lujan said the city relies on consultants to make that determination.

"(The city is) just doing what they have to do in order to make the eminent domain process work," Gudzunus said. "I don't see them as being rude, but manipulative."

Tenants at the site agree, accusing officials of being belligerent.

After more than three years building clientele for The Chop Shop, barber shop owner Ricardo Guzman said officials forced him to move out of the strip mall prematurely.

"They lied to me," he said, adding since his move to a new Amar Road location six months ago, business has been slow and rent is \$1,000 more monthly.

By law, city officials are required to assist tenants with relocation costs as a result of eminent domain proceedings, according to Yamachika.

But Guzman claims the money he received was not enough.

"I don't think I got a fair deal," he said. "It wasn't enough for me to buy new stations, new floors. I had to put some money out of my pocket."

Murphy said if the city was willing to pay their "fair shake" for the property, Gudzunus would consider selling.

A settlement conference is scheduled April 10. If an agreement is not reached, jury selection for

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trial will begin May 19.

"The staff ... has made sure we are going through this process in a very methodical manner," Lujan said. "Our hope is we can reach a conclusion prior to any trial.

"But at the end of the day, we have to realize the process itself has to play out."

tania.chatila@sgvn.com

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