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Same players, same debate at redevelopment kickoff in Martinez

By Lisa P. White
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MARTINEZ — A meeting Tuesday to kick off the umpteenth try to form a redevelopment agency was mostly a rehash of the argument Martinez has been having for the past 50 years, but with a small twist.

The new wrinkle: Councilman Mark Ross wants to have residents help come up with a prioritized list of projects paid for with redevelopment money before the City Council creates an agency.

"What are we going to do with the money? That's a legitimate question," Ross said.

Vice Mayor Lara DeLaney said Ross' approach has merit. But she prefers the traditional process of establishing the agency first, then setting the boundaries of the project area and adopting the redevelopment plan.

Neither strategy is likely to win over the group of staunch redevelopment opponents, so the effort to reach a consensus may prove futile.

"They make a bunch of promises, but the problem is the agency will exist regardless of whether they keep the promises or not," opponent Tim Platt said.

City leaders countered that residents can weigh in at every step along the way by forcing a referendum on the redevelopment agency, project area and plan. But critics say it costs too much to get an issue on the ballot to be able to do so repeatedly.

"You have to stop the formation (of the agency); that is your only chance," Platt added.

For all the rancor redevelopment creates, city leaders do not anticipate a huge cash windfall from it. A 2003 feasibility study concluded Martinez would reap about \$25 million in tax increment revenue over the 30- to 40-year life of the redevelopment agency.

"Yes, it may be a small amount of money. But a small amount is better than no amount, especially when you're talking about infrastructure needs in the downtown that we can't afford to build," DeLaney said.

Possible redevelopment projects include a downtown parking garage, sewer improvements at the marina and updating the electrical grid downtown.

Supporters say redevelopment agencies protect property tax revenue from being seized by the state. But in the past two years, California leaders have tried to take redevelopment funds to fill the state budget gap.

Critics argue that redevelopment siphons money from schools, police and other public services. They also dislike that redevelopment agencies can issue bonds without voter approval and use eminent domain to take private property.

The council is considering the downtown, marina

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and North Pacheco area, which the city is trying to annex, for redevelopment. Ross and DeLaney pledged again Tuesday that the redevelopment project area will not include residential property.

The subcommittee could hold a public workshop to talk about projects this month. It is operating under a tight timeline, though, because Mayor Rob Schroder has said he wants to adopt the ordinance in enough time so that a referendum would appear on the November ballot if opponents succeed in forcing a vote.

Lisa P. White covers Martinez and Pleasant Hill. Contact her at 925-943-8011.

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