

News

LODI HITS BRICK WALL ON REDEVELOPMENT

CITY NOT SURE WHAT'S NEXT AFTER LATEST EFFORT FAILS

By **Daniel Thigpen**

March 05, 2009

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LODI - Twice, Lodi's policymakers have put forward plans to redevelop the city's aging East Side, and each time the proposal has gone ice cold amid public outcry.

With the most recent effort defeated in a referendum Tuesday, it's unclear what is next for Lodi's older half and its deteriorating network of streets and pipes, its dormant business corridors and neglected neighborhood rows. There are no immediate answers.

Redevelopment would have been a tool to finance rehabilitation projects without raising taxes, Mayor Larry Hansen said. With current city funds for capital projects tight or, in some cases, nonexistent, Hansen guessed any future refurbishments likely will hit Lodi residents with increased costs in some form.

"I think change is going to be very slow" on the East Side, he said. "When (infrastructure) needs to be replaced, ... open up your wallet, because we don't have a lot of options.

"We're kind of a city that doesn't want to help itself," Hansen said, "and that's frustrating."

JoAnne Mounce, the lone City Council member who opposed redevelopment efforts and who lives on the East Side, said there are other solutions available, such as forming special neighborhood maintenance districts. "I have offered many suggestions that have not been carried through," she said.

City leaders asked voters to uphold their approval last year of a plan to designate more than 2,100 acres of town as a redevelopment zone.

Redevelopment allows cities to keep a larger portion of their property tax dollars that otherwise would go to other government entities and use the money to finance revitalization projects.

City officials estimated the special district could have generated as much as \$2.9 million in its first three years for redevelopment projects.

Opponents worried decision-makers would send the city deep into debt through redevelopment projects and would not use the money wisely. It was a fear that resonated with voters, who Tuesday defeated the redevelopment referendum, Measure W, 54 percent to 46 percent.

Only about 30 percent of Lodi's registered voters participated in the special election, and most of them voted by mail before Tuesday. The election essentially was decided before precinct votes were even counted.

That left some supporters wondering Wednesday whether city leaders should have put the measure on the November general election ballot - voter turnout was at record highs - when they had the opportunity last summer.

Instead, the measure was left to voters who had just participated in three previous elections last year and with only one item on the ballot to consider Tuesday.

That worked against redevelopment supporters, said Pat Patrick, chief executive officer of the Lodi Chamber of Commerce, which ran the Yes on W campaign.

"We would have been better served if we had been a part of the November election, for sure," he said.

Lodi policymakers had been down the redevelopment road just seven years prior. In 2002, opponents led a

petition drive against a similar redevelopment proposal, prompting city leaders to back off instead of calling a special election.

Last time, opponents were primarily worried about the city government seizing private property for redevelopment.

What was different about the most recent effort, however, was that when city officials revived redevelopment talks in 2007, eminent domain for private uses had since been outlawed in Lodi. And policymakers left the practice out of the proposed redevelopment plan.

Additionally, city officials anticipated controversy. They went on a monumental public relations blitz, from town hall meetings to multilingual fliers, to sell the idea of redevelopment before City Council members voted on the proposal.

In the end, a loose network of volunteers opposed to redevelopment mustered up enough votes to defeat a well-financed measure backed by development and business interests.

The city spent about \$300,000 on a redevelopment plan now voided and about \$135,000 on a special election.

John Johnson, a former City Council candidate and local columnist who supported redevelopment, said Tuesday's vote reflected many residents' general distrust of government. With a long list of city facilities, equipment and parks that need upkeep and no money available, Johnson said residents' doubt might be justified.

"Here in town, people have a good reason to look at (Measure W) and say, 'Wait, you want me to do this, and you want me to trust you with what will be millions of dollars?' " he said, "but you haven't made very good decisions with the money we've given you so far."

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