



A long road home

By [Kevin Uhrich](#) 06/04/2009

Dozens of people lacking better living space had fashioned makeshift homes for themselves in cement vaults underneath the San Bernardino (10) Freeway in Baldwin Park, near the San Gabriel River — the dank caverns' dirt floors littered with remnants of drug use, but containing chairs, beds, blankets, carpets and even evidence of a child's nursery.

The LA Times reported last week that few might have been aware of this situation if not for a USC journalism student who was working on a story about homelessness and found what its residents called "The Cave." The situation later came to the attention of the state transit agency, Caltrans, and law enforcement, which then kicked everyone out and closed the place up with welded steel plates.

The scene oozed with an infuriating irony. Many probably don't know this, but Caltrans is actually in the real estate business, renting to nonprofit agencies and low- to moderate-income people — just like some of these cave-dwellers probably were before their last paychecks ran out — in many of the 18,000-plus properties that the agency has come to own over the past half-century through eminent domain proceedings for planned projects. Some have called Caltrans the country's biggest slumlord, and agency officials have done little to refute that reputation. In fact, nearly 500 of those Caltrans-owned homes of various values and conditions are right here in Pasadena, South Pasadena, and El Sereno — byproducts of a freeway extension project that has been on hold, decades in the planning with still no clear end in sight.

But even worse than seeing Caltrans deprive people of at least a dry place to stay is knowing these are the very same folks responsible for squandering perhaps billions of dollars in potential state revenue — funds that could be used to help stave off cuts in public services that will lead only to more poverty, more uninsured women and children, more people living in parks and under freeways.

The Southern California Association of Governments estimates the homes in the so-called 710 Corridor alone are worth up to \$500 million at fair market value. Of course, no one is saying the people who are now renting those homes should be kicked out. Quite the contrary; they should be given a chance to buy them, a possibility that current law provides for.

The problem — both for prospective tenants and lawmakers who want to get their hands on those properties — is that many of those homes are vacant, are not on the rental market and have been that way for a number of years.

As we reported in February, the Corridor contains 122 homes in Pasadena, 99 in South Pasadena and 265 in El Sereno. Of those, 51 were not on the rental market. Another 34 were vacant. A total of 85 homes, or nearly 18 percent, were sitting empty, doing nothing but rotting away.

Assemblyman Anthony Portantino of Pasadena has had his eye on those houses — not as rentals, but to finance cash-strapped colleges and universities. Portantino's bill would require Caltrans to sell its properties, except for those occupied by a school or nonprofit organization since at least Jan. 1, 2004, offering them first to the occupant. The bill would require an amount equal to the department's acquisition price of the parcel to be deposited in the State Highway Account. After that reimbursement, "All remaining sale proceeds would be deposited in the General Fund, to be available, upon appropriation, for increasing funding for public higher education."

Portantino isn't the only one who believes sale of those Caltrans homes could help balance the state budget. Pasadena attorney Chris Sutton, who's been battling with Caltrans for years over tenant rights issues, said that if Portantino broadened his sights to take in the roughly 18,000 other Caltrans-owned properties around California, which include whole farms in the Central Valley, "we could fill a \$10 or \$15 billion hole in that state deficit."

If that happened, maybe then there would be enough money left over to find those squatters in Baldwin Park — along with multitudes of others — a decent place to stay.

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