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City receives development zone report

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VISTA – A report on Vista's ambitious redevelopment plan was delivered this week to the city, where an advisory panel will use it to make recommendations to a City Council intent on reshaping the community.

For weeks, the Project Area Committee, a nine-member residents group, has waited for the report, by Orange-based consulting firm Urban Futures Inc. It presents specifics and costs for adding more than 1,900 acres to the city's redevelopment area.

By declaring the 1,900-plus acres as blighted, Vista would increase its redevelopment zone from 19 percent of the city to 37 percent.

“It's very important,” committee member Laura Hill said of the 100-page report. “We need to be able to read it and make the best decisions for everyone.”

City staffers have refused to release the document to the public – including committee members – before reviewing it, but say it should be available today.

The committee has until Aug. 18 to make recommendations to the City Council about the scope of the redevelopment expansion plan. A public hearing will follow, and then the council will vote on the plan.

“Up to now, there hasn't been a lot of specifics, but they are starting to emerge,” said Brooks Cavanaugh, another committee member.

Among the report's findings, according to information obtained under a Public Records Act request and sources interviewed, the redevelopment area would need \$60 million to \$100 million in infrastructure improvements to entice businesses.

The money probably would be raised through bonds and by tapping state and federal grants. All of that would be contingent on economic conditions in the financial markets and city finances, said Ernie Glover, a consultant with Urban Futures, which is doing the report for the city for about \$150,000.

The report suggests areas where the money could be spent, such as flood-control projects, seed money for emerging businesses, street repair and subsidies for low- and moderate-income housing programs.

It also justifies the legal findings of economic blight by noting where properties are deteriorating, housing is overcrowded and other factors.

City officials cautioned that the label of economic blight does not mean every property is in poor shape, but that taken as a whole, the area has problems.

Glover said he envisions the city issuing “three or four or five” bonds in \$20 million increments to help finance improvements in the redevelopment zone.

“We are presenting the bigger picture over the next 45 years,” Glover said. “Redevelopment isn't that rich a program, so it can't do everything.”

By state law, the City Council was required to appoint the advisory committee. The group of homeowners, renters, business owners and community agencies was formed in April to advise the council on redevelopment matters for the next three years.

Committee members said zoning issues and eminent domain – the power of a government to take private property at a fair market price for public benefit – have been some of the more contentious issues they have tackled so far.

City officials have repeated their intent not to use their eminent-domain powers in residentially zoned neighborhoods, but have made no such promises in areas where businesses and homes coexist.

Creating redevelopment zones allows cities to use property tax increment in the area for improvements and increases eligibility for certain grants.

Essentially, the tax increment is the increased property tax collected after a redevelopment area is established. The idea is that by issuing bonds to pay for improvements, property values will rise and the resulting revenue will be used to repay the bonds.

The Vista Village commercial area and the south Vista business parks are examples of large redevelopment projects the city has undertaken. The Project Area Committee will meet at 5:30 p.m. Monday at City Hall, 600 Eucalyptus Ave.

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