

Grantville is focus of redevelopment effort

Plan isn't a reality yet and faces opposition

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The Grantville most San Diegans see is a patchwork of older commercial strips and an aging industrial zone.

City officials want the district's business sections to look brighter and more prosperous through a budding redevelopment effort there.

If the plan goes ahead, Grantville will become the city's 17th redevelopment zone.

That means the area – largely a swath of land along Mission Gorge Road from Interstate 8 to Mission Trails Regional Park – will have more money available for improvement projects such as widening streets, fixing potholes and controlling flood-prone lowlands.

It also means, in the eyes of some longtime merchants, the possibility of having their businesses bought out from under them in the name of progress.

Dan Dallenbach supports the idea of a redevelopment area. A property owner on Mission Gorge Road, he sees it as the only way to ease traffic congestion and control chronic flooding.

"Without (it), we'll never get anything done," Dallenbach said.

Like several other merchants and property owners, he listed traffic snarls at Mission Gorge Road and Fairmount Avenue and flooding from Alvarado Canyon Creek as Grantville's top problems. One person has called the Mission Gorge-Fairmount intersection – which feeds a busy Home Depot store – a "traffic horror story."

"If I didn't think those issues will be addressed, I wouldn't be on the side of doing this," said Dallenbach, a member of a citizens advisory committee on Grantville redevelopment. "I think there are huge health and safety issues there."

On the other side of the issue, the owner of House of Cars believes his used-automobile business will be threatened.

It wouldn't surprise most people involved if a new commercial complex replaced House of Cars or one of the other older used-car lots in Grantville. If an owner doesn't want to sell, the redevelopment area status will give San Diego the power to buy the property through eminent domain.

Attorney Arthur Sloane, who represents the House of Cars owner, said it is unjust to remove a profitable business just because someone thinks it looks shabby.

"He would prefer normal market conditions to dictate the buying and selling of property," Sloane said.

The Grantville redevelopment area is not a reality yet.

The city recently finished a draft environmental impact study, and the Planning Commission and City Council will vote on whether to create the zone. City officials expect those decisions to come this summer.

The city's redevelopment agency will take public comment on the environmental report at 10 a.m. tomorrow at City Hall.

Councilman Jim Madaffer was the catalyst for the Grantville redevelopment effort.

Madaffer said he doesn't foresee the city finding money to make the needed street and other improvements any other way.

"The fiscal realities of the state and the city mean we should look at the tools of redevelopment," he said.

In a redevelopment zone, 65 cents of every dollar of new property tax money must be spent on infrastructure projects in that area.

Looking north along Mission Gorge Road, Madaffer said, he expects "instead of a forgotten part of San Diego, instead of something that came along without a plan, people will start to see a purpose."

Grantville is a neighborhood with a long past.

The area started in the 1880s as a residential development named after Gen. Ulysses S. Grant – a marketing ploy to attract Civil War veterans, according to one history text.

Many businesses there are decades old, including dozens of auto sales and repair-related companies. But they are mixed in with a 7-year-old Cush Honda dealership and a Home Depot built in 1998. Kaiser Permanente has a hospital, a medical center and other offices there, and newer businesses – including Starbucks, Rubio's and Jamba Juice – have entered the commercial line-up.

There are no single-family homes in the proposed redevelopment area, according to the city, so the emotionally charged idea of a family losing a house to make way for new construction doesn't apply.

The commercial district is an entrance to Allied Gardens, a long-established neighborhood of middle-class homes. One unconnected piece of the redevelopment zone would be in Allied Gardens along Waring Road, where an Albertsons shopping center sits.

City Project Manager Tracy Reed said that area was included to help keep the shopping center in place after residents expressed fears that the center could be replaced by low-income housing.

Another section is a heavy industrial zone farther east along Mission Gorge Road where Superior Ready Mix operates a quarry and leases land to other heavy-duty users.

A technology park has long been penciled in on top of that land. A spokesman for Superior Ready Mix, which supports the city's effort, said the company plans to do some kind of development there in the future.

To move forward, the city must prove the area is physically and economically blighted.

A consultant's report listed several examples of blight in Grantville: incompatible property uses, low lease rates, poor site configurations, inadequate parking and obsolescent buildings, among others.

Sloane doesn't believe it.

"You have a thriving business community. There's no blight," he said. "They are going at it backward. They want to call this a redevelopment area, so they'll go find something that's blighted."

The concept of eminent domain is facing scrutiny this year. The U.S. Supreme Court is expected to hear a Connecticut case in which a city condemned seven nonblighted homes standing in the way of a waterfront redevelopment that would bring jobs and tax revenue. The *Kelo v. City of New London* case could change the rules for redevelopment, some experts believe.

Philip Teyssier is one Grantville commercial property owner tracking the Supreme Court with some hope. His family does not want to be forced to sell its land, which provides an income from leases.

"It's not fair to use tax money to put people out of business," Teyssier said.

These concerns have not been quieted by city officials' assurances that San Diego will apply eminent domain sparingly in Grantville. Madaffer has pledged that condemnation of property will be used as an "ultimate last resort."