

Agency seeks extension to take property

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LONG BEACH - A Redevelopment Agency's future ability to seize North Long Beach property through eminent domain will come before the City Council.

Agency members - against the protests of a room full of residents - voted Monday to recommend that the council extend to 2020 the RDA's eminent domain authority in the North Long Beach Redevelopment Project Area.

Tonight, the council will take no action on the recommendation but will hear from the community on the issue. The council will decide later whether it supports extending the agency's authority.

When the redevelopment plan for the North Long Beach Project Area was adopted in 1996, the agency was given the power to acquire property with eminent domain, though state law allows the agency to have that authority for 12 years. If the council votes to support amending the plan, the agency's authority, which expired in July, would be renewed 12 more years.

City officials said eminent domain would be used as a tool to eliminate blight, assemble commercial properties and create housing. They

stressed that the agency has never taken an owner-occupied home in the project area in the 12 years it had the authority.

Still, that did not comfort many property owners, who packed the Council Chambers on Monday morning to voice their opposition.

"We're concerned," said homeowner Jaime Darris. "We don't know. We would feel more comfortable if they would just take that owner-

occupied, eminent domain (language) out of it. If they're not looking at buying homes anyway, why have it in there?"

Other owners said the authority affects their property values.

"By virtue of this meeting alone our properties are now even lower because you have now said that their properties are possibly going to be touched by you folks," resident David Gomez said. "We can no longer get what the market would be worth for our homes because now this meeting has said to anybody that's a potential buyer, 'You don't want to buy this property because it would be seized at any time.'"

City officials said homeowners are protected under Proposition 99, which prevents the agency from using eminent domain to take single-family homes for private development. Properties can still be taken for public projects like roads, parks or police stations.

Board member John Cross said having the

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authority is a way of protecting neighborhoods.

"Eminent domain gives us a hammer to do something," he said. "We walk up to a guy and say `Look, you clean up your property, you straighten your act up or we're going to shut you down. They're going to listen. But if we have nothing to hold over their heads, they're going to be doing business as usual and the residents that live in the areas are going to be the ones being hurt by it."

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