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The Vons shopping center at Escondido and Santa Fe Avenues in Vista is one of many properties that would be designated for redevelopment under an expansion plan that will go before the City Council on Tuesday. (Photo by Waldo Nilo - staff photographer)

VISTA: City moves toward revitalization

By CRAIG TENBROECK - Staff Writer

VISTA ---- Every day, thousands of motorists pass a shopping center on Escondido Avenue. Yet the area, speckled with vacant storefronts, is hardly booming.

Blocks away, in the hardscrabble barrio of Townsite, homes and streets are showing the chips and fissures of age.

As an antidote for this urban decay, city staffers have drafted an aggressive plan to nearly double the size of Vista's redevelopment territory.

That would open new avenues for stimulating development along stagnating corridors and repairing the infrastructure in deteriorating neighborhoods, officials say.

Staffers floated the idea nearly one year ago, and public reactions have run the gamut.

Some have embraced the idea; they envision glossy new projects akin to the Vista Village shopping center downtown or the city's business park.

But others have bristled at the prospect their land would be declared "blighted" ---- a legal term required for redevelopment.

In July, an advisory committee of business owners, homeowners, tenants and community groups endorsed the plan, setting the stage for Tuesday's City Council vote.

A public hearing is scheduled for 5:30 p.m. at City Hall, 600 Eucalyptus Ave.

A larger umbrella

Vista already has 2,100 acres, predominantly along commercial corridors, designated for redevelopment. The expansion would add another 1,700, including the Townsite neighborhood; a wide swath between South Santa Fe Avenue and Highway 78, east of Escondido Avenue; the Vista Way corridor; and a pocket south of Highway 78 near Sycamore Avenue.

It's a complicated plan, and some fear the city hasn't put all their cards on the table.

"It's all very vague and I don't want to take the gamble," said Betty Gilroy, an artist whose family has lived in the hills off South Santa Fe since 1990.

Months ago, Gilroy's home was part of the expansion area, but the city later excised it from the proposal.

Redevelopment Director Bill Rawlings said the neighborhood wasn't run-down enough to qualify for redevelopment. But Gilroy attributes the city's change of course to her neighborhood's complaints.

"We made a fuss," she said last month. "And we were relentless about it."

Not all community members share Gilroy's distrust.

At a recent City Council meeting, resident Lenny Comma, a vice president at Jack in the Box restaurants, encouraged the city to follow through with its expansion plan.

"You can make this city very attractive to the private sector ---- which is already looking for places to grow, develop and invest their capital," he said.

Council members beamed.

The money game

A complex and controversial tool, redevelopment gives cities the power to retain money as property values increase in struggling neighborhoods.

Typically, cities issue bonds against those revenues to give developers incentives.

Years ago, Vista used redevelopment to turn its aging downtown core into the Vista Village shopping and entertainment center.

That made resident Brett MacFarlane a redevelopment fan.

"What a huge difference," MacFarlane said during a recent city meeting.

"My kids go down there. Friends go down there. If anything like that can come out of this new redevelopment for other parts of Vista, you've got to do it," he told the council.

But as an economic tool, redevelopment has its detractors.

Some say it drives out small businesses in favor of big retailers. Others claim it steers much needed tax revenue away from other agencies.

Property tax is ordinarily shared among cities, county governments and other taxing entities. But once an area is designated as blighted, the city's redevelopment arm captures the bulk of the "tax increment" ---- the increase in property tax revenue after the base year.

Vista projects it will net \$352 million in tax-increment receipts from the expansion area over 30 years.

"When redevelopment clicks on we stop getting the benefit of any growth in assessed value," said Kaye Hobson, finance director for the county's community services group.

The county routinely eyes local cities' redevelopment plans. And sometimes, it takes action, such as three years ago, when it sued the city of San Diego over property tax losses due to redevelopment.

In an interview last month, Hobson said the county had not yet drawn any conclusions about Vista's plan.

"We have to evaluate it very carefully and weigh the benefits of redevelopment to the loss to the county," she said.

She did not return calls last week.

Soothing nerves

City staffers have had a tough challenge this year addressing fears of eminent domain ---- the power of government to take private property in redevelopment areas at fair market price.

They have offered repeated assurances to nervous residents that the city won't invoke eminent domain for residentially zoned properties.

Yet those words have provided little solace to Jerome Hymes, a central Vista resident whose home is in a commercially zoned area.

The city estimates there are a few dozen such homes in the city.

Though Hymes, who sits on the advisory committee, was part of the July vote in favor the expansion plan, he backtracked last week, saying that he wasn't aware that vote was final.

He said he's still afraid the city will take his home, despite the recent passage of state Proposition 99, which prohibits governments from forcing the sale of owner-occupied homes for private projects.

"There are so many loopholes in Prop. 99 and I'm concerned about that," Hymes said.

Rawlings said homeowners need simply look to history to predict the future.

"The city has never used eminent domain to condemn anyone's home," he said. "In fact, we've never used it at all."

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