

'NO GRAB' CONTESTS REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY

Grassroots group working to keep agency out of Gardena; voters to decide on Nov. 2.

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The two dark beige houses nestled on a lot in a country-like setting in Duarte are there no longer.

Nor are the six houses which formed that specific block of Denning Street circa 1964.

Bill Labeaud used to jump ("not dive") from the roof of the backyard guest house into the family's 20-foot by 40-foot swimming pool.

Bushes and trees separated each house by about 300 feet on either side. And the empty field at the foot of the cul-de-sac provided a play area for the neighborhood children, when they weren't watching the trains pass.

Bill's wife, Rowena, called it their perfect home.

"This was that first home, that American dream that you know you work hard and you're young and you struggle and save," she said. "[The] perfect setting to raise our children."

What the Labeauds did not anticipate was something called *em-*

inent domain.

The state planned to lay the 605 freeway through the Labeauds' property.

So in 1964, after four-and-a-half years of residency, Bill, Rowena and their four children had no choice but to pack and move.

The family was compensated exactly what they paid for the property regardless of the modifications they made to the home. During that period, those impacted by eminent domain could not have their property appraised. Today, fair market value is offered to property owners to relocate.

No GRAB

Rowena copes with the fact that their area was designated for public use; however, the feeling hasn't quite escaped her.

Now living in Gardena, and not wanting to have her home threatened again, she and her husband are fighting with a group that calls itself No Grab, the acronym for No Gardena Redevelopment Agency Boondoggle. The group's singular purpose is to prevent the ad-

vent of a redevelopment agency in the city of Gardena.

Steve Sherman, co-chairman of No GRAB, said the council members have misconstrued the reasons for its opposition, and the premise that it will create jobs, restore the city's finances and crimeless streets are statistically unfounded.

"The falsehood put out by the city is that we're opposed to the concept of redevelopment. We're not opposed," Sherman said. "We just believe that when you look around the city, redevelopment is occurring and it continues to occur today."

Measure G

Eminent domain is only one of the four expanded powers that such an agency inherits and that these opponents of Measure G, which goes before voters Nov. 2, said can further cripple this city's financial condition which is already swimming in red ink.

Gardena owes about \$26 million in immediate debt - about \$80 million total - and council members said the adoption of a redevelopment agency could po-

tentially revive this city, which has pocket areas wrought with crime and blight.

No GRAB is concerned that a redevelopment agency will give Gardena too much control to council members, who have appointed themselves as overseers. Other cities nationwide with redevelopment agencies in place have shown a tendency toward abuse of power, according to *L.A. Times* recent articles.

Also, last month, council members approved the addition of 54 words to the ballot measure that apparently altered the language to induce voters to see the agency in a favorable light. That drew the ire of No GRAB.

The language was retracted immediately by the city following the threat of a lawsuit.

With eminent domain comes the authority of business subsidies: the power to give public money in various ways to assist developers; bonded debt: the authority to sell bonds secure against future tax increment without voter approval and tax increment: the exclusive use of all increases in property tax generated in a project area, which means that funds are typically diverted from public services such as school, libraries and emergency respond units.

Councilman Oscar Medrano said there are avenues to prevent the removal of funding and with the adoption of this agency, it can steer an outmoded city into the 21st century.

"Redevelopment is one way to bring developers into the community, one way to build parks and to change the city," Medrano said. "A lot of the zoning in the city was done years ago and it needs to be updated and changed. And that's what we're currently doing."

Mayor Terry Terauchi agrees, yet said that a redevelopment agency would give the city leverage to group together smaller parcels to accommodate larger commercial development that could bring in greater sales tax.

"We've made a tremendous amount of progress for commercial development in the city for the past five years both in the area of residential and commercial," Terauchi said. "But, there are many areas in the city where large commercial projects would be a benefit."

"You have many large commercial entities like Home Depot or Vons which find Gardena attractive, but it's difficult to acquire the land because their projects are so large and they often

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times have to deal with a multitude of property owners and that difficulty discourages them from coming into a particular area like Gardena."

No Grab's primary concern is defining what blight is and isn't. The definition for blight is often loosely translated and state law equivocally classifies it in the sense that almost anything can be designated as blight. To create a redevelopment area, that area has to be condemned as blighted.

There is also the belief that big box or larger commerce shouldn't be favored over mom and pop stores and smaller businesses for the sake of generating more sales tax revenue.

Rosecrans Corridor

Council members have the north end of the city as their primary target for redevelopment with concentration on the Rosecrans Corridor.

This is where the contentious debate over the redevelopment agency mounts.

The lot where Alpha Beta was situated has been dormant for about 13 years. This particular location is in the study area for redevelopment and which could possibly lead to the condemnations of apartments behind the lot and a nursery that has been in business for more than 54 years.

No GRAB is sensitive about this site in part because A) Where does one relocate a nursery? B) Where do the families in the apartment complexes find shelter elsewhere and for a comparable price to rent?

Medrano said the council has been unfairly targeted for being over-zealous at attaining the old Alpha Beta lot. And that the council is taking steps toward redeveloping throughout the city.

He said the agency could provide the funds to assist developers. And he envisions development outside of commercial projects.

"We're not planning to put peo-

ple out of their houses; we're not planning to close any businesses down..." said Medrano, who is a business owner and admits that he is putting his store on the line. "Gardena needs more parks; we want to build new parks. Gardena needs more libraries and senior housing in the community. Gardena can be much more than what it is today."

In 1975 and 1977 the effort to create the agency by the council was thwarted by then resident Gwen Duffy, who formed a coalition which subsequently played a vital part in defeating the ordinance 2-to-1.

During her tenure as a councilwoman from 1982 to 1999, she said the idea of establishing a redevelopment agency only surfaced once, in '97, however, that council was the least likely to proceed with the process.

Debt remains

That same council, though, is a central cause for the debt the city has, said Medrano. In the early to mid-'90s, council members (none of whom serve on the present council) made a decision to invest in two insurance ventures - Mutual Municipal Insurance Company and a program for first-time home buyers, which in retrospect evolved into fundamental errors.

"No one on this council caused this to happen," Medrano said of the debt. "But it seems that almost everyone that's caused this problem to happen is fighting the redevelopment issue. Why? I don't understand, but they need to fess up to the mistakes they made and help find a solution to this [debt] problem."

Duffy said she regrets not having the foresight to abandon the two fruitless programs.

"I wish it can be undone," she said. "We certainly had no bad intentions. I own up to it. It was not good"

So, before the council can create the agency, No GRAB is attempting to turn down what it thinks is a similar or worse endeavor and with the current council, which it has no faith in.

"That's our goal. It's very difficult to slow them down or stop them once they get going,"

Sherman said. "They'll just nibble away, little project after another until they take the whole city or certainly can."

"They've already designated as study areas every industrial property and most commercial property."

Kenneth L. Sutton, who supports the council, believes citizens should trust the officials they've elected to represent city.

"Any community redevelopment practice has the potential for abuse," Sutton said. "But the positives outweigh the negatives. People should have plenty of confidence in the agency to work out matters; and it's not going to betray the public."

Said Terauchi: "There always has to be a concern that lines can be crossed over and that elected officials misrepresent themselves by cutting deals with large companies. Lots of money is involved in terms of the investments by these companies. So it's a matter of trust and the people must trust who they have elected."

But due to several moratoriums that are preventing certain firms from developing, Sharman said that should cite reason for apprehension.

"If you want development to occur, you work with developers to get the type of development that you want," he said. "It's not like the area is stagnant and no one wants to develop. So let's continue development and we can continue to do it without the agency."

The reason, Medrano said, is that those firms "won't bring a penny to the city," and believes that this conflict has turned long-time friendships into short-term adversaries.

Either way, the day after the city votes, it will resume normalcy for better or for worse, with or without the redevelopment agency and in Duffy's view, the decision made about decade earlier, serves as the template for today's decision.

"I wish they could learn from our mistakes and not get into further debt which would be in the agency," Duffy said. "It won't help the city's debt and general fund budget."