

Artists, activists want warehouse for a home; city has other ideas

By Leonel Sanchez
STAFF WRITER

Barrio Logan artists and activists are staking claim to a dilapidated warehouse owned by the city and intended for commercial development.

The sprawling warehouse sits on prized property just south of downtown San Diego, near Chicano Park.

The group has moved into the warehouse and plans to hold an open house featuring poetry and music tomorrow to celebrate the start of the Chicano Park Arts Center.

The city has given the group temporary permission to use the warehouse, at 1901 Main St. The group wants to stay longer, but the city plans to sell the property to one of two local businessmen who claim

to have broad community support.

"The city owns this property and the community is saying that we need an arts center," said muralist Mario Torero, who is helping lead the drive for a permanent center.

Torero admits the group lacks financial backing and wants the city to step in to help make up for what he called years of neglect of the community, which is west of Interstate 5.

"We've been asking for one for 30 years," said Torero. "We had to take over a park once just to get a park," he added, referring to community action that led to the creation of Chicano Park in the 1970s.

The group's hopes are clashing with city interests. And the commu-

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Staking claim: *Luis Garcia stood in front of the Barrio Logan warehouse that he wants to turn into an entertainment complex featuring boxing, concerts and other events.*

Warehouse

Group has temporary OK but wants to stay longer

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nity is divided over the future use of the warehouse, which sits next to the Barrio Logan trolley station on land the city spent \$2 million to purchase.

The city expects big returns.

Luis Garcia wants to turn the warehouse into an entertainment complex featuring boxing, concerts and other events.

Garcia owns Chuey's Cafe, a popular restaurant that is catty-corner from the warehouse.

Robert Shapiro, who owns industrial and commercial property in Barrio Logan, wants to convert the sprawling warehouse into a produce market.

Both men claim to have broad community support, as does the neighborhood group that is currently using the warehouse, which is on a 40,000-square-foot lot.

It's going to be up to the San Diego City Council to sort it out.

The city has spent millions of dollars to acquire the three-block area east of the trolley station for redevelopment and take advantage of its proximity to downtown.

The warehouse is across the street from a 6.5-acre area the city acquired a few years ago with \$7.5 million in federal money. The city recently spent \$5.5 million to widen Crosby Street, which runs along the proposed new business corridor.

The city is looking for a buyer who can build a shopping center in the 6.5-acre area bounded by Crosby Street, National Avenue, Main Street and the San Diego-Coronado Bridge.

Garcia has a bid for that property, too. The city is considering three other proposals, including one from Shapiro and the nonprofit Metropolitan Area Advisory Committee.

Garcia lately has been focusing his attention on defending his proposal to convert the warehouse into an entertainment complex. The city's redevelopment agency has expressed security concerns but has not made a recommendation.

Garcia also has promised that the community would have access to the center he is proposing, but the access would be limited.

"This area was historically a dumping ground," he said. "But now it's going to be an enterprising zone. Downtown is going to extend all the way to Barrio Logan."

The redevelopment agency also expressed concerns about Shapiro's proposal to build a produce market, since it might conflict with the proposed shopping center across the street.

Shapiro may have an edge over Garcia in the bidding process.

The advisory Barrio Logan Project Area Committee voted 8-5 last year in favor of his project over Garcia's. The vote was nonbinding.

Critics question whether he had an unfair advantage.

Shapiro was the chairman of the advisory group when the property went up for sale. The city required him to step down when he became a prospective buyer, said Byron Estes, project manager for the Barrio Logan Redevelopment Project.

Shapiro was not available to comment about his proposal.

The group pushing for a cultural arts center wants to submit a proposal, but it's too late already, said Estes. "We have two finalists."

The city's original agreement with the group dates to last fall. It allowed artists to use the warehouse to produce art work for in-SITE97, the three-month binational art exhibit. The group stayed on with city permission to prepare for the upcoming Chicano Park Day celebration.

Now the group is campaigning to stay permanently.

Last month, several members went before the City Council to demand an arts center at the site. The council postponed a hearing on the matter for two months.

The group has been making itself at home while it waits for a decision.

Members have hung their artwork and set up a makeshift library and a community room. Last month they hosted a nonalcoholic Super Bowl party. A narcotics anonymous group began meeting there recently, too.

Torero said the group plans to raise money and does not want to give up its dream of a permanent arts center.

Neighborhood artists made Chicano Park famous with their murals, he said.

"We need headquarters. We need a place to call our own," he said. "This is the place."

City Councilman Juan Vargas, whose district includes Barrio Logan, could not be reached for comment.