

Boyle Heights Seeks Balance Amid Change

Redevelopment plans include upscale condos, but activists don't want poor residents and small-business owners to be forced out.

By Lisa Richardson
Times Staff Writer

July 24, 2005

In a hulking, tattered apartment building on Mott Street in Boyle Heights, four families share one bathroom and one stove.

It is a lifestyle without dignity, said Guadalupe Lopez, whose family — nine in all — squeezes their beds, clothes, television and other belongings into two rooms on the second floor.

"We are people, human beings," she said. "To have to live like this is unbearable."

A nanny by day, Lopez, 46, is a housing advocate at night, chanting "*El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!*" (The people united will never be defeated) at community meetings demanding better housing for the working poor.

Boyle Heights, a densely populated neighborhood east of downtown Los Angeles, is changing; developments are going up and millions of dollars in government subsidies are poised to pour in.

Among plans for the area, a Santa Monica-based developer is finalizing drawings for a \$300-million project of upscale condominiums and retail outlets at the landmark Sears building. If the project comes to fruition, affluence will gain a toehold in a community where the median household income is \$24,821 and unemployment is 14%.

Some residents, including Lopez, wonder whether the project will make enough room for those who can't afford high rents or mortgages.

A coalition of community groups, made up of the East L.A. Community Corp., Union de Vecinos and Homeboy Industries, has galvanized a contingent of low-income residents — gardeners, maids, nannies, housewives and some small-business owners — urging them to speak up for affordable housing before it's too late.

Their plea is part of a citywide movement for zoning that would require developers to set aside units affordable to a family making below the area's median income.

About 20% of the proposed 772 housing units in the Sears project are required to be affordable — usually defined as within the budget of a family that earns below the local median income. Activists say it's not enough and not the right kind; they want units that

are three bedrooms and larger.

The Boyle Heights area has experienced a net loss of affordable housing over the last five years from a series of publicly funded redevelopment projects, among them the proposed new Hollenbeck police station and the destruction and redevelopment of the Aliso Village, Pico Gardens and Pico-Aliso housing projects, according to Union de Vecinos.

The group tallied a net loss of 380 affordable units from the three housing project renovations. More than 125 additional units would be lost to the extension of County-USC Medical Center, an extension of the Gold Line rail service, and the Hollenbeck station replacement.

Vouchers Awarded

But developers and city housing officials say the loss of units has been offset by hundreds of federal Section 8 rent vouchers that have been awarded to residents displaced by development projects.

"It is true that the actual physical units were diminished, but we were successful in getting [a] grant" for more Section 8 vouchers, said Rudolf Montiel, executive director of the Los Angeles Housing Authority.

At the Aliso Village project, Montiel said, "when the units were ready for them to return, they were offered to come back, and many families indicated that they weren't interested, that they were happy where they were."

Some business interests and homeowners believe projects like the Sears redevelopment can hoist Boyle Heights up the economic ladder and provide yearned-for amenities, such as restaurants and a movie theater, that come with upscale condominiums. More low-income housing is the last thing they want.

"The question is: How do you clean up Boyle Heights?" said Leonardo Vilchis of Union de Vecinos. "If you ask some people, they'll say you clean it up by providing decent housing and good jobs for the poor people who live here. Others will say you clean it up by clearing out the poor people who live here."

Francisco Jacobo, 56, a gardener, was ousted twice from an affordable home because of publicly funded projects.

In 1996, the city tore down the Aliso Village housing project, where he lived. He then found a home large enough for his family of six on Chicago Street, for \$939 a month. But in April, that house was torn down to make room for the expansion of the Hollenbeck Division police station.

Now the Jacobos pay \$1,100 a month for a two-bedroom apartment on Cincinnati Avenue.

Although visions of what the Sears project should include vary, the housing component worries almost all sides. Even some who favor the arrival of upscale condominiums say 772 is too many.

Victoria Torres, a member of the project area committee, loves the idea of upscale amenities but objects to the number of condos. To her, activists' demands for affordable housing, particularly three-bedroom units, also seemed unreasonable.

"I don't want to keep this a low-income community," she said. "We've got to expand Boyle Heights to people with middle income. It's unfair to us who own property here to keep it low."

Though renters may feel pressed, landlords feel harried, she said.

"Talk to landlords," she said. "They'll tell you what it's like when somebody says they're a couple, you rent the house to them and then, before you know it, they've got their aunts and uncles and all their cousins living in there with like 11 people. It's unfair."

Renee Chavez, a member of the Boyle Heights Neighborhood Council, said the community has the makings of a near-perfect place to live — if it were not already so overcrowded and if it could be appropriately developed.

Officially, about 89,000 people live in the community's 6.6 square miles, according to the Los Angeles Planning Department. But many residents say that number does not include thousands of illegal immigrants.

"We are in a great location, and everybody knows Boyle Heights is going to be pretty and it's going to happen soon," Chavez said. "But more affordable housing? That's ridiculous. We want a 14-screen beautiful theater with appropriate parking." And stores other than Sears. "I'd love to be able to shop in my own neighborhood, but I don't like polyester," she said.

Even without redevelopment, Boyle Heights is seeing a surge in housing prices as is the rest of Southern California.

Housing prices are up 25% over last year's, and activists say rents are rising just as quickly — as are evictions.

Last year, the Los Angeles Center for Law and Justice saw 225 people fighting evictions in Boyle Heights. In the first six months of this year, 206 people have sought help.

The Eviction Defense Network says its caseload for downtown through East L.A. has more than doubled.

"We're seeing a lot of cases where tenants who apparently were perfectly good tenants for

many years suddenly become very bad tenants when a new landlord buys and has a higher mortgage and incentive to get them out," said Executive Director Elena Popp.

Residents also complain that affordability is a relative term. The maximum selling price of an affordable condominium, as determined by the city Housing Department, is \$336,000, according to the Community Redevelopment Agency. But a higher-priced unit can qualify as affordable if the CRA can provide a qualified buyer with a second mortgage on easy terms.

Pricing of units in the Sears project has not been determined, said Donald Spivack, deputy chief of operations for the CRA.

Rent to Increase

Sixto Osorio, 36, has run L.A. Cuts, a hair salon on Whittier Boulevard, for 15 years. Until two months ago, he paid \$750 a month in rent. But the landlord said he plans to renovate the building and charge \$3,000, according to documents Osorio showed. He will move out in August.

The Sears project, Osorio thinks, should make room for the small-business owners who have roots in Boyle Heights.

Tim Meier, director of development for MJW Investments Inc., said the firm has tried to balance community needs with financial realities in the renovation of the 1920s mail-order warehouse, which was closed in 1992.

For two months Meier met with neighborhood groups and parent-teacher groups, the Boyle Heights Chamber of Commerce, Mothers of East L.A., Homeboy Industries, churches and numerous other groups.

"We heard everything," he said. "We heard, 'We need affordable housing, we need family-style housing, we need senior housing.' One of the largest voices we heard was, 'We need housing for young professionals.' Obviously we need to create a project that is going to try to address everybody's needs."