



## Mission Park looks up



### City buys two vacant lots for affordable housing to help turn around gang-ridden neighborhood

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John Gastaldo / UNION-TRIBUNE

Christian Patstone, 11, of Valley Center kicked a football at Grove Park in Escondido. The city is considering turning a 4-acre city-owned lot in Mission Park into a temporary soccer field.

ESCONDIDO — This New Year, Escondido's Mission Park residents who have despaired over their gang-infested streets and poverty-ridden surroundings have reason to feel hopeful.

On Christmas Eve, the city closed escrow on two unsightly vacant lots for development into affordable housing to jump-start Mission Park, the poorest neighborhood in the city and North County.

Mission Park, bounded by North Broadway, East Lincoln Avenue, North Ash Street and East Valley Parkway, is home to 20,000 residents, a fraction of the city's 143,000 people, but it has been the focus of the city's redevelopment and anti-gang efforts for years.

One of the parcels is at 537 N. Elm St. It's a half-acre lot surrounded by four old homes and which was

once used as an illegal encampment and illegal dump.

The city paid \$200,000 for the land, using money from a \$1.3 million federal neighborhood stabilization fund that arrived recently, said Jerry Van Leeuwen, the city's community services director. Van Leeuwen said he thinks the site can accommodate nine affordable units.

The other parcel is at 1282 N. Broadway. It is a one-third-acre lot just outside Mission Park. The city bought it for \$250,000, with hopes of building three affordable units there.

Escondido will solicit developer proposals for both parcels this year, Van Leeuwen said.

At the same time, the city is considering converting a 4-acre vacant lot at East Washington Avenue and North Ash Street into a temporary soccer field to supplement Mission Park's only recreational space, the 4.7-acre Grove Park built in 2007.

That lot was earmarked for development, Van Leeuwen said, but because developers are hesitant to build in this economy, the city could rezone the land for temporary use.

"It's a nuisance, full of litter," he said. "When they submit their application, it can happen quickly."

Danny Perez, community outreach director for Misión Vida Nueva, a church that has been pushing for recreational space in Mission Park, said his group will apply to use it as a temporary soccer field soon.

"The children have no place to go. We want to form coed leagues for families, adults and children so that families can compete together, create pride in the community," Perez said.

Nearby, the notorious Elder Place, a cul-de-sac that has been a nest of gang activity, is transforming, as well.

A Santa Ana-based developer, Urban Housing Communities, has bought 13 of the 16 dilapidated buildings and demolished 12, with one more to be torn down soon.

The developer expects to begin building a \$28 million project this spring, providing 55 low-income rental units in five buildings in a gated community to be called The Crossings at Escondido. It will have a community center.

The two- to four-bedroom units are expected to rent for \$505 to \$1,061 a month, and applicants will be screened to weed out criminal elements, said Mark Irving, director of land planning and entitlement for the developer.

Irving also said Urban Housing has applied to the city to change the name of the street from Elder Place to Mission Grove Place for a fresh start.

To continue the city's concentration in the area, the Police Department this month is adding a second officer to patrol Mission Park exclusively.

The police have credited the targeted effort for significant crime reduction at Elder Place, where violent crimes and residential burglary dropped 28 percent from 2006 to 2008.

While the city labors to transform Mission Park, its residents are helping themselves.

They have formed 13 neighborhood groups, and 100 parents have volunteered for the SAFE WALK program that provides safe passage for students as they walk to and from school to shield them from gang members. Another group of volunteers feeds the poor every Saturday under the auspices of Misión Vida Nueva.

“There’s a lot of awareness of the needs of the community, and it has forced a lot of people to get involved,” Perez said. “Before, Mission Park was like an island where nobody wanted to come. Now, everybody is talking about the good things happening here.”

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