

# Heads Up in Highland Park

## 'Neighborhood' Funds to Help Revitalize Community

by Eddie Rivera

Highland Park, one of Los Angeles' oldest suburbs, is set to receive \$3 million over the next three years as part of the City's Targeted Neighborhood Initiative (TNI) program. According to a budget prepared by the City Planning, Housing and Public Works Departments, and the Community Redevelopment Agency, the community will

### NEIGHBORHOODS

receive \$540,000 for housing rehabilitation, as well as \$80,000 for home ownership assistance in the first two years of the program.

The targeted zone runs along the historic Figueroa Street business district from Avenue 50 to Avenue 61. The area will also receive \$440,000 for commercial facade improvements and \$200,000 to create a new streetscape. The Highland Theatre, in the center of the community's business district, will enjoy a \$50,000 facelift to renovate its facade and rooftop sign.

It's an important step for the hilly community just north of Downtown. The improvements here, in fact, epitomize those which strive to preserve the character of other neighborhoods across Los Angeles.

About the program, Mayor Richard Riordan, who championed TNI through City Council, told L.A. Downtown News, "I'm always asked by people in the community, 'What are you going to do about the graffiti and dumping in this community?' My answer is always 'Nothing.' But if the communities organize, then the government is always there to help. This is a sophisticated version of that idea, with money. This is how you remake neighborhoods."

The program, which includes 11 other neighborhoods from Harbor Gateway to Canoga Park, is an empowerment plan which grew out of the former Los Angeles Neighborhood Initiative (LANI) Plan. Funds would come from the federally-funded Community Development Block Grant program. According to Riordan, the TNI program is the first of its kind to be implemented in the nation.

"The purpose of the program is to physically improve our neighborhoods, not for piecemeal programs," said Riordan.

#### Historical Origins

The community now known as Highland Park was originally part of a 36,000-acre Spanish land grant given to retired military officer and rancher Jose Maria Verdugo in 1784. Approximately 32,000 acres of the land were purchased in 1869 by Alfred Chapman and Andrew Glassell, who then divided the grant into 31 parcels, one of which was named Highland Park.

Highland Park has been plagued in recent years by a declining business community, an increase in absentee landlords and a lack of adherence to the community's historical architecture. And, according to some observers, a dearth of local leadership and an ineffective Highland Park Chamber of Commerce had slowed the TNI process to a crawl over the last year. No TNI funds have been distributed yet.

However, efforts are underway to boost the area. Five Requests for Proposals (RFPs) have been prepared by the City Planning Department and are due to be mailed to stakeholders in Highland Park in the coming weeks. These would provide \$500,000 for a Youth, Family and Children's Center, \$420,000 for storefront facade improvements, \$50,000 for bettering parks and libraries, \$30,000 for a streetscape design manual and \$50,000 to create an organization to help administer the TNI plan.

"We're just dotting the 'i's and crossing the 't's," said City Planning Department Deputy Director Gordon Hamilton. "As soon as we complete the RFPs and get them approved, we'll get them out on the street and we can get the ball rolling."

Hamilton is enthusiastic about the program's potential. "Judge us in three years," he said.

#### Rich Concentration

Riordan has also asked for a micro-business loan program to be included as part of the TNI. According to the Mayor's office, the loans are meant to act as leverage or "seed money," and to attract private sector investors to the community.

The TNI program coordinates block grant funds and City agencies in order to concentrate efforts on a specific neighborhood. The City hopes to impact the various com-

munities in three areas: achieving a demonstrable difference in the quality of life, establishing sustainable community improvements which can be measured by the residents, and learning which service delivery systems can be applied to other neighborhoods.

The program works in cooperation with local stakeholders under the leadership of a City Interdepartmental Team and a Targeted Neighborhood Coordinating Committee. The Interdepartmental Team—made up of various City agencies—is the front-line component of the program, conducting neighborhood meetings to discuss how best to implement the program. The team reports to the Coordinating Committee, which keeps the Mayor's office apprised of the progress.

If all goes well, the TNI program will be one of the most significant steps in restoring Highland Park to its former glory.

According to a Planning Department study, the area, which parallels the Arroyo Seco River, has the richest concentration of historical houses in Los Angeles, including craftsman homes and courtyard bungalows.

Former L.A. Times City Editor Charles Lummis built his landmark Highland Park home along the banks of the Arroyo over 15 years in the late 1800s and early 1900s with help from the local Yang-Na Indian youth. His home, "El Alisal," is now the headquarters of the Southern California Historical Society. It is one of several historically-designated homes in the area. Others include "Abbey San Encino," typographer Clyde Browne's eclectic Mission-style es-

tate. It happens to be where his grandson, singer/songwriter Jackson Browne, was raised, giving another nod to Highland Park's artistic history.

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—Mayor Richard Riordan