

Homeless Drift in Hollywood's Rising Tide

Agencies assist the down and out, but critics fear their efforts will stall the area's renaissance.

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The brawl started on the Hollywood Boulevard sidewalk and ended in a busy car dealership's service bay.

A quarrel among young runaways who hang out near the eastern end of the Hollywood Walk of Fame escalated into a fistfight that spilled into Toyota of Hollywood, sending customers and mechanics scrambling out of the way.

The altercation late one recent morning resulted in relatively minor injuries. But it was another punch in the stomach to those who worry their Hollywood neighborhood is becoming overrun by the homeless just as the once-glitzy district is finally in the midst of a renaissance.

Some 20 drop-in centers, shelters, homeless feeding programs and health clinics already dot the area around Hollywood Boulevard and Gower Street. And the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency has just purchased three lots steps from the intersection and announced plans to construct up to 60 residences and a companion social services program catering to the homeless.

Backers argue that the project will be good for Hollywood because it will take homeless people off the street and put them into long-term housing.

But a growing number of critics fear it will lure more street people into the area, potentially jeopardizing Hollywood's fledgling revitalization that has nightclubs, high-end hotels and trendy restaurants popping up.

The proposed \$20-million homeless project would rise just blocks from what civic leaders are hoping will be a cornerstone of Hollywood's rebirth. There, at Hollywood and Vine, an ambitious retail and residential development includes conversion of the old Broadway department store into lofts and construction of a luxury 300-room W Hotel and an accompanying 150-unit residential complex. They will be around the corner from such hot spots as the ArcLight theater complex, Amoeba Records and the Sunset/Vine retail center.

"It's ironic that while we're on the verge of creating a vibrant new Hollywood, we're at the same time creating a potential Hollywood skid row," said Fran Reichenbach, founder of the Beachwood Canyon Neighborhood Assn.

The clash illustrates the looming problem officials face as they make a new push to deal with the homeless problem citywide. As part of the campaign, a delegation that includes several City Council members and business leaders was in New York this week to examine how that city has dealt with its homeless problem.

Much of the focus has been in downtown's skid row, where a boom in luxury loft and condo development is bringing middle-class residents into an area that a recent census found to have 3,668 people living on the street or in shelters.

Downtown's gentrification has led to talk of decentralizing the many homeless services that are available in skid row. But the nervousness around Hollywood and Gower suggests that finding willing neighborhoods to take these services will prove difficult.

Hollywood's estimated 2,100 homeless are different from downtown's. Many are young runaways, most are white, and their time on the street can often be measured in months, not years. In contrast, skid row's are

older, mostly black and chronically homeless because of mental illness or substance abuse.

The Hollywood homeless dispute began within the quiet confines of one of the community's oldest and staidest institutions: Gower Street's landmark, 102-year-old First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood.

Financial problems that led to the resignation late last year of its two top pastors forced the church to sell three Gower Street parcels to the redevelopment agency for \$5.8 million.

To win the church property, redevelopment officials had to outmaneuver private developers Adolfo Suaya and David Maman, key figures in the burgeoning Hollywood restaurant scene, whose deal with the church was already in escrow.

The agency ended up paying legal costs incurred by both the church and the developers in exchange for the developers backing out of their purchase.

Redevelopment officials insist their project will benefit the community and that residents will have ample time to weigh in.

"We're looking for a team to build it, provide social services there on a long-term basis, to manage it and bring outreach to the community," said John McCoy, senior finance officer for the agency's Hollywood office. Various forms of governmental funding will be sought to cover the estimated \$10-million to \$15-million construction cost. The finished units will be used for long-term housing, not as a temporary shelter.

Los Angeles City Councilman Eric Garcetti, who represents the Hollywood area, supports the project and notes that it was undertaken only after a local group — an interfaith church organization — asked that something be done to address Hollywood's homeless problem.

"We are opposed to turning more people out on the streets of Hollywood," he said. "If we're serious about cleaning up our streets, we have to be serious about permanent housing and supportive services for the homeless."

As many as 60 young runaways visit the 13-year-old Teen Canteen daily for free breakfast. Up to 15 at a time can also be accommodated in its "day room," where they can relax off the street.

Lunch is available nearby at the 18-year-old My Friend's Place, a Hollywood Boulevard drop-in center used by about 70 youths daily.

Dinner is served at the Way In, a Salvation Army-run center that has been on the boulevard since the mid-1980s and plays host to up to 65 youths each evening.

"They didn't come here because we opened our doors," Gabriella Wynn, the Way In's executive director. "We opened our doors because the kids were already here. No, this area is not oversaturated with these services."

But some merchants on Hollywood Boulevard believe the service centers are a blight on the district that is just now beginning to recover from decades of decline that came as crime soared and many landmark movie theaters shut down.

"How many times do you want to be accosted for spare change or cigarettes as you walk from your car into the store if you're a customer?" said Vladimir Bedoyan, who has operated a photo shop there for 23 years.

Bedoyan's shop is one of 28 stores in the Gower Plaza, a two-story mini-mall at the northeast corner of Gower and Hollywood.

Gower Plaza co-owner Ekram Kadri said the young street people are sometimes threatening.

"One kid kicked a big dent in my car right in front of me. He dared me to hit him," Kadri said. Another youth stole a sandwich from the mall's convenience market and then knocked merchandise to the floor when an employee refused to let him microwave it, he said.

The redevelopment agency's property is directly behind his plaza. "I already have tenants saying they're leaving if that new shelter comes in," he said.

In front of Gower Plaza, a half a dozen youths stood on the corner, sharing cigarettes and killing time until it was lunch hour down the street at My Friend's Place.

Crissy Eccoeston, 18, praised "MFP," as she called the drop-in center. Workers there took her to her sonogram appointment when she was pregnant. Her 7-month-old son now lives in a foster home, she said.

"I've been on the street for three years. I was banned for life from the Teen Canteen. I kicked out a window when one of the case managers wouldn't let me have food to go. I had a doctor's appointment and I couldn't wait around to eat," she said. "But I'm going to change my lifestyle. I have a little boy now I have to worry about."

Nearby, 21-year-old Avery Moreland also talked of change. He has been living on Hollywood streets for three months, since coming from Austin, Texas, in hopes of becoming a movie cameraman. He has since designed a line of clothing, he said, and is thinking of moving to Hawaii — where he said a friend has a big house — or enrolling at Santa Monica College.

He said the Toyota car lot fight involved "a tweaker who was harassing a couple of our friends" from the Hollywood-Gower group.

From a nearby bus bench, 19-year-old Corey Bean nodded in agreement. He said he's been "kind of stuck here" since hitchhiking to Hollywood a year ago from Northampton, Mass.

"My parents are saving money to come out and see me," he said, brightening.

Moreland leaned over and addressed Bean quietly. "You should be moving back to Massachusetts," Moreland said. "When they come, dude, you should go back home with them."