

Daily Breeze

A Fight for Hawthorne Park

By Sandy Mazza and Catherine Lyons Staff Writers, **Daily Breeze**
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Wearing T-shirts printed with the words "We need a park at 118th and Doty," a group of high school students and community activists quietly protested the auction of a vacant Hawthorne lot.

Despite the group's outcry, the Caltrans-owned property was sold last week to a developer for \$300,000.

It was a blow to the students, who have helped clean the blighted lot since last year, and a community group that had pleaded with the state Department of Transportation to turn over the property for a park.

"We're just going to keep on trying," said Environmental Charter High School student Wendy Hernandez, 16, after the sale Wednesday. "We've been cleaning it and doing things to it. We care about this land, but these people don't."

Community activist Viviana Franco said she was crushed by the sale. Since last year, she had garnered the support of local politicians and community groups in her effort to build a green space on the lot in her park-poor neighborhood.

Franco, 29, created a nonprofit called From Lot To Spot because of her work trying to turn the triangular-shaped property abutting the Century (105) Freeway into a park. The land was purchased by Caltrans to be an on-ramp to the 105 Freeway, but was never used. Franco wanted Caltrans to lease or sell the property at a nominal fee to the nonprofit.

But state law dictates that excess properties like this one must be sold immediately at fair-market value.

Still, Franco has pushed on, believing there must be some way to bring a park to her densely built neighborhood.

Now that Caltrans has sold it, she said she is seeking legal advice, and trying to contact the new owner to ask whether he will donate some of the property for a park.

"We really feel that they owe this to the community," Franco said. "The community really wanted a park here, and I've seen what this vacant lot has done to this community. It's shaped people's attitudes. It's brought fear, regret, 20 years of hopelessness."

Franco is blunt about problems at the lot. Most mornings, a new crop of trash and used condoms can be found there, she said.

When Environmental Charter High School students from Lawndale cleaned the property last year, they found unsavory discarded items, along with a cockroach colony.

But Franco also has fond memories of the lot where she rode her bike and played baseball as a child. It is near her family's home, and it served as a storage space for construction equipment while the 105 Freeway was being built.

Caltrans spokeswoman Maria Raptis said the agency bought the 13,070-square-foot lot in 1988 for the freeway, but didn't use it. In 1991, the agency sold the lot. But, in 1996, the owners defaulted on loan payments and Caltrans reclaimed the land.

A sore point for Franco is that, after Caltrans reacquired the land, it somehow forgot about it until she started asking questions in 2004.

Hawthorne paid to clean the property a few times each year, and sent the bill to Caltrans. The agency didn't repay the city until last year, city officials said.

As a graduate student at UCLA, Franco was haunted by her childhood playground. She wondered why it had been ignored and left to ruin. Why didn't anybody seem to care that prostitutes regularly used it as a workplace?

She soon discovered that the lot had been lost in paperwork. Caltrans officials told her that it had been sold to the city in the 1990s, but the city denied that. Last year, Caltrans realized that it was the owner and promptly put it up for sale.

Officials did not respond to questions about why Caltrans ignored the lot after 1996.

Like Hawthorne, urban areas across Los Angeles County are plagued with low ratios of park space per resident, said Tsilah Burman, executive director of Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust.

"In Los Angeles County, only 34 percent of children have access to a park within a quarter mile," Burman said. "It's the way Los Angeles developed - without infrastructure the older areas sort of developed based on real estate transactions. I don't think there was a conscious effort to incorporate parks."

Franco said that she doesn't want other children to grow up without a local park, as she did.

For her work, she was awarded a "community hero" award from the Caesar E. Chavez Foundation. She has also been nominated for a Shero Award from the 51st Assembly District.

Still, Franco does not know if the vacant lot will be turned into another house or a safe, green park.

"To say the least I'm very disappointed and a little heartbroken," Franco said. "But this is not the end and we will still fight for what is right."