

Daily Breeze

Group Gets 90 days to Buy Park

HAWTHORNE: Although sale is delayed, buyer says he won't give up parcel of land without a fight. By Sandy Mazza, Staff Writer, **Daily Breeze**
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A Hawthorne community group is one step closer to turning a vacant lot into a park - even though the property was auctioned off in April.

The California Transportation Commission late last week stopped a proposed sale by the California Department of Transportation to give the community group, From Lot to Spot, 90 days to buy it.

FLTS is now hastily trying to raise \$300,000 to buy the parcel, which abuts the Century (105) Freeway at 118th Street and Doty Avenue.

CTC Chair John Chalk said the decision was simple.

"What we saw was that it was an item that would have benefited the community," Chalk said. "While there are very tight restrictions on the disposition of public property we felt that there would be no loss to allow them an extra 90 days to see if they could find some other funding source."

Viviana Franco, the creator of FLTS, said that even though the group has not secured any grants or donations, she is sure they will find the money.

"I think it's such positive energy behind this that it's going to happen," Franco said. "We're very excited."

Franco hopes to receive grants from state conservancies and other public agencies.

But the business owner who bought the lot at auction in April said that he will not give it up without a fight.

"I bought it," said Ali Awad, owner of Repossess Auto Sales in Hawthorne. "They were at the auction that day. Why didn't they bid on it?"

He said he gave Caltrans officials a cashier's check for \$300,000 and is waiting for the property title. He has no plans to develop the land, however. "I'm an investor," he said. "I buy piece of land, piece of land, piece of land - tax deductible and all that."

The 0.3-acre lot is a piece of Caltrans-owned land that was left over after the Century Freeway was built. For about 20 years, it has been vacant and unnoticed by everyone other than nearby residents.

As a child, Franco rode her bike around it and played games with friends there. She wants to make it the park of her childhood dreams.

While the vision sounds nice, it did not resonate with Caltrans.

Soon after Franco started asking Caltrans to allow her to build a park there in 2006, the department put the blighted lot up for sale.

She asked Caltrans officials to meet with her to work out a lease for her group to build the park. Caltrans' response was cold.

"They said, 'If you want the property you must be the highest bidder,'" Franco said. "There was no presenting a case to them. There was no 'You have unique circumstances.' There was none of that."

After years of brisk denials from Caltrans, she was surprised when the CTC sided with her.

Now, Caltrans officials are ready to meet.

"I'm sure we're all going to be working together to resolve this issue," Caltrans spokeswoman Jeanne Bonfilio said.

Franco, 29, has generated a drumbeat of local support for the small, triangular-shaped lot.

Since last year, students from Lawndale's Environmental Charter High School have held cleanup days at the lot to clear accumulated debris. Some students accompanied Franco and local residents at the April auction, wearing T-shirts that read: "We need a park at 118th and Doty."

Earlier this year the Hawthorne City Council wrote letters to Caltrans and passed a resolution of support for the park. Assemblyman Curren Price Jr., county Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke and Rep. Maxine Waters also wrote letters, agreeing that Hawthorne badly needs more parks.

Crystal Holmes, a 16-year-old Environmental Charter High School student, said she supported the park because, "We really need a park in Hawthorne. These kids have no place to play and run."

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