
Article published Jun 24, 2006

Highlands residents fight against city's plans: Some fear Renton will use eminent domain to make them leave

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RENTON — City Councilman Randy Corman can empathize with residents of the Highlands who are fearful the city will condemn their homes to develop a high-density urban village intended to reinvigorate the area.

Corman, the council president, stood side-by-side on a busy street corner Friday afternoon with a group of Highlands residents waving "no eminent domain" signs.

"The mayor tried to take my house," Corman said.

Mayor Kathy Keolker was a city councilwoman in 1989. That year, the council tried to condemn Corman's Highlands home — the same home he lives in now — to clear the way for a new development.

After a court battle, Corman won and was able to keep his home. But he says he'll never forget the frustration and the intimidation of challenging government.

Corman was so disturbed by the situation that in 1991 he decided to run for the City Council. He targeted Keolker, because "of the pivotal role she took in condemning my property," he said.

Keolker held on to her seat, but Corman would grab a spot on the council in 1994.

On occasion, Corman said, he'll say to his wife that he should work harder to cooperate with Keolker.

But his wife always responds: "But she tried to take our house," Corman says, with a chuckle.

"That's the back story," Corman said. "That's what set up this whole grudge match."

The mayor was out of the office Friday and could not be reached for comment but the city's vision for the Highlands is to transform a neighborhood, which is dotted with blighted homes, into an urban village. To that end, the city is trying to

increase the housing density.

However, an appeal lodged by the Highlands Community Association puts the city's vision on hold, at least until the fall, said Alex Pietsch, the city's administrator of economic development, neighborhoods and strategic planning.

Pietsch said Friday the city has always talked about eminent domain as "a last choice after all other strategies have been exhausted."

He said the belief that the city is likely to condemn properties is "being perpetuated by people who have their own agendas."

The residents believe they are in the path of the city's vision for a renewed urban village in the Highlands, near Sunset Boulevard Northeast, just east of Interstate 405. And they are concerned the city will use eminent domain powers to make them leave.

Corman estimates the city is unlikely to use eminent domain to build its urban village, considering the current makeup of the City Council.

At least four of the seven council members are against using eminent domain, Corman said Friday — which marked the one-year anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Kelo V. New London* decision, which broadened governments' eminent domain rights.

In response to that year-old decision, President Bush on Friday signed an executive order declaring the federal government can only seize private property for a public use such as a hospital or road.

Last month, Corman pitched a resolution to the City Council which would have eliminated the possibility of using eminent domain powers in the Highlands neighborhood.

"I was essentially filibustered," said Corman, adding that council members unwilling to commit to such a step used government process to avoid a vote on the resolution.

Until the city eliminates eminent domain as an option, the Highlands residents will live in a constant state of anxiety, Corman said.

"It's like taking months away from their lives," Corman said.

"As soon as you realize how many rights have to get trampled to do this, you should realize you need to do the hard work of finding another idea," Corman said.