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Scores of Harrison homes may be razed for schools

Thursday, February 17, 2005

By Rose Duger
Journal correspondent

HARRISON - The Mendez family's home represents years of sweat equity.

As a young couple, Roberto Mendez and his wife worked long hours at full-and part-time jobs to save for the down payment. After nine years, they purchased the three-family house and got to work making it comfortable for themselves and their three children.

Now, a little more than three years later, the family may lose their home as part of a plan by the state Schools Construction Corporation to expand town schools and increase services for children and teachers.

"I did the backyard so my children could play there," said Mendez, adding that the children of his tenants also use the yard. "It's a place of my own. It's my home. It's like family, and they're taking that away from me."

The Mendez family isn't alone.

In all, the state is considering razing nearly 80 homes and commercial properties in town to make way for the current Harrison High School's expansion into a middle school with adjoining fields, two additions to Lincoln School to double the size of the structure, a new, larger school on the site of Washington School and a satellite parking lot for teachers.

Mendez's property is part of a triangular-shaped tract at Central Avenue and North Fifth Street that has been designated for teacher parking, a state requirement when building new schools.

Other areas that may lose homes include North Third Street between Hamilton and Cleveland avenues, both sides of Patterson Street between Hamilton and Harrison avenues, Central Avenue between William and Cross streets and several homes on Cross Street adjacent to Lincoln School.

As a state-designated Abbott district, Harrison qualifies for full funding for the school construction projects. Several weeks ago, ground was broken for a

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new, larger Harrison High.

Local officials and parents of schoolchildren have long complained about overcrowding and inadequate physical facilities for the town's growing school-aged population.

At a meeting last Wednesday on the proposed school expansions, Thomas Ahern of the SCC's property procurement division fielded questions from residents, who were largely angry about the state's proposal and nervous about the fate of their homes.

The SCC is preparing to launch three separate feasibility studies for the proposed projects. When completed in about six months, the studies will identify properties to be razed.

Within a month, affected property owners will receive letters from Ahern notifying them that their home or business is being considered as part of the project.

"The scary part about condemnation is the state has the right to purchase your property. That's a horrible thing," Ahern admitted. "But the state has to build decent schools. The not-so-horrible part is that the state of New Jersey - in this case the Schools Construction Corporation - can't tell you what your property is worth."

While Ahern cautioned property owners not to panic, since the studies may exempt certain properties, he admitted that "more likely than not" owners who receive letters will lose their properties.

Upon completion of the feasibility studies, the SCC will begin negotiating with owners to purchase properties.

If owners and the SCC appraisers can't agree on a price, a judge will appoint a panel of three Hudson County real estate experts to determine one.

The SCC will also assist homeowners in identifying comparable properties within Harrison, and will pay the difference for owners to purchase a comparable home. Moving expenses up to 50 miles are also included.

Tenants receive a 42-month rent supplement, as well as moving expenses.

"A number of people use that money and make a down payment for a house. We encourage that," Ahern said of the rent subsidies.

The loss of so many homes may mean a big loss of ratables for Harrison, according to Anselmo Millan, a former Harrison councilman. Millan estimated that the town would lose between \$600,000 and \$700,000 in ratables.

"The Town of Harrison is a distressed city. We receive aid from the state, and now we're losing ratables," said Millan, whose home is not being considered for demolition.

"We understand that education is very important. But to us, these are not houses. These are homes. This is where we choose to live. These people don't want to move out. They have whole families here."

Cleveland Avenue resident John Kozdron echoed Millan's sentiments, calling for a referendum to determine if voters agree with the proposed school expansion.

"Can't there be a referendum to find out what people in this town actually want,

or a petition to determine what people don't want to happen?" said Kozdron, who could lose the home he's lived in for the past 59 years.

"So many senior citizens on my block are going to have a hard time finding a house. It means they're going to have to move out of town."

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