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Road to new stadium gets first green light

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By Matthew T. Hall

San Diego's downtown redevelopment arm yesterday secured the first approval in a series it needs to spend larger amounts of money repairing blight downtown.

Chief among the beneficiaries of the effort would be the San Diego Chargers. The team wants to build a football stadium downtown and needs hundreds of millions of dollars of public money for a venue that could cost up to \$800 million.

The Budget/Finance & Administration Committee of the Centre City Development Corp. voted 5-0 yesterday morning, with Director Steven Relyea absent, to embark on a process that could take 15 to 18 months.

CCDC Chairman Fred Maas equated yesterday's first step to "asking our doctor if we may start the arduous process of training for a marathon."

Maas said the effort to lift a cap on how much money could be redirected downtown in the form of future property tax revenue owes its momentum to one factor above all else: Plans backed by Mayor Jerry Sanders and the team to build a stadium on land bounded by Imperial Avenue and 14th, 16th and K streets.

"It's about a stadium," Maas said after yesterday's meeting. "But it's about things bigger than a stadium."

Under state law, the CCDC could spend nearly \$2.9 billion repairing blight and rebuilding downtown through 2043, but officials expect to hit that cap in 2023 or 2024.

Under the cap, they estimate they have \$386 million of discretionary spending for a list of anticipated projects.

They don't yet know how much more money they'll need for an updated list.

They estimate it will cost \$500,000 to hire lawyers, economists, engineers and soil experts to figure that out and to prepare reports required by state redevelopment law to appeal the agency's cap.

The full CCDC board will take up the issue Jan. 27 and the council is expected

to consider greenlighting the appeals process next month.

Only two people addressed the CCDC committee yesterday.

Jason Everitt of the Center on Policy Initiatives, a local labor-friendly think tank, said the CCDC should be mindful of creating quality local jobs.

Gary Smith, president of the San Diego Downtown Residents Group, advised CCDC officials not to forget downtown's current needs by focusing on new projects.

Because of another commitment, Councilman Kevin Faulconer showed up to speak at the hearing a few moments after it ended. In a letter to Maas Monday, Faulconer, whose council district includes downtown, urged fast action.

"We have a duty to see this plan through to completion," he wrote.

Lifting the cap requires the blessing of the City Council, the state departments of Finance and Housing and Community Development and four government entities that have tax-sharing agreements with the CCDC.

They are the county, the San Diego County Office of Education, the San Diego Unified School District and the San Diego Community College District.

Maas said he and Frank Alessi, CCDC's executive vice president and chief financial officer, discussed the issue once with county chief administrative officer Walt Ekard and are scheduling meetings with the other agencies.