

# San Jose Mercury News (CA)

December 14, 1997

**Section:** Local

**Edition:** Morning Final

**Page:** 1B

## GROUNDBREAKING A MULTICULTURAL EVENT MEXICAN HERITAGE CENTER RECEIVES BLESSING OF MANY

*KEN MCLAUGHLIN, Mercury News Staff Writer*

The skies were gun-metal gray, the temperature awfully cold. But most of the 300 people who gathered on a six-acre site in East San Jose to witness the realization of a dream couldn't have been more happy or content.

"This is a major historical and cultural moment," said Joe Coto, superintendent of the East Side Union High School District, as ground was broken for the Mexican Cultural Heritage Gardens and Plaza. The 33,000-square-foot project, expected to be finished by spring 1999, is being hailed by Latino leaders as a model that will spark similar projects across the country. It will rise at Alum Rock Avenue and King Road, creating an imposing gateway for a primarily Mexican-American neighborhood.

The cream-and-terra cotta buildings will include a 500-seat theater, art gallery, plaza, three gardens, classrooms, office and more than 10,000 square feet of retail space.

Moreover, a bevy of speakers said Saturday, the project will foster hope and pride among thousands of young Latinos who will come to understand the richness of their culture.

For too long, young Mexican-Americans have been made to feel "ashamed" of their ethnicity, said Fernando Zazueta, chairman of the Mexican Heritage Corporation.

Folklorico and flamenco groups gave the audience a taste of that culture Saturday when dancers and other performers -- some in kokopilli, traditional Aztec headdress -- helped bless the four corners of the earth. In a display of multicultural goodwill, they were joined

by two African-American groups as well as a Buddhist monk and other Vietnamese emigres in traditional ao dai.

San Jose Mayor Susan Hammer and other speakers said the main credit for the center should go to Santa Clara County Supervisor **Blanca Alvarado**, who conceived the idea when she was a city councilwoman in the late 1980s. The crowd agreed, giving **Alvarado** a standing ovation.

The project's garden will be one of four internationally themed cultural gardens in San Jose. The others include the Chinese Cultural Garden in the Overfelt Botanical Gardens and the Japanese Friendship Garden in Kelley Park. The Vietnamese Cultural Heritage Garden is planned near Capitol Expressway and Senter Road.

The Mexican-American center has not been without controversy.

Last year, David Pandori and Pat Dando, city council members sitting on the city's redevelopment agency board, voted against funding the work.

The cost of the project has escalated rapidly since **Alvarado** first proposed it -- from several million dollars initially to \$30 million with the addition of a full-scale performing arts theater. Dando had called the theater an "extravagance."

But officials of the agency, which will cover all but \$3 million of the project costs, say the money will be well spent. Redevelopment Director Frank Taylor predicted Saturday that the project will prove to be an economic engine in long-neglected East San Jose.

On Saturday, about 25 neighbors staged a small protest at the groundbreaking ceremonies. The demonstrators demanded that the Mexican Heritage Corporation ban alcoholic beverages at the site, arguing that the area is already saturated with too many liquor outlets.

"Don't Let Our Children Drown in Liquor," said one sign. "Cultura Si, Alcohol No," said another.

"They've basically ignored our concerns about the issue of alcoholism in the community," said Felix Alvarez, a leader in the fight. "This place is for

the education and the arts and involves children. It should be alcohol-free. We don't want to turn it into a party place."

But Pete Carrillo, president of the Mexican Heritage Corporation, said that the alcohol issue has been anything but "ignored." In fact, he said, the board recently appointed a task force to come up with a proposed alcohol policy.

**Illustration:Photos (2)**

PHOTO: JUDITH CALSON -- MERCURY NEWS

The Rev. John Pedigo of St. Joseph Cathedral blesses the site of the planned cultural center Saturday.

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A woman identified only as Axayacatl, wearing traditional Aztec clothing, carries smoking sage to the blessing ceremony for the Mexican-American cultural center.

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