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Twins get \$990,000 for loss of land

Condemnation of parcel involved a campaign donor to Mayor White

By MIKE SNYDER
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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A city development agency has paid \$990,000 to settle a lawsuit over the city's condemnation of a small piece of land adjacent to a mixed-use project being developed by a major campaign donor to Mayor Bill White.

The settlement was reached in late August and the previous owners of the land, 76-year-old twin brothers James and Jock Collins, were paid about a month ago, said their attorney, J. Cary Gray. The agreement didn't require City Council approval because the money came from the Uptown Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone rather than from general city revenues, officials said.

The city acquired the property through eminent domain in March 2007 after negotiations between the Collins brothers and developer Ed Wulfe broke down. Wulfe is the developer of BLVD Place, a planned mix of apartments, shops, restaurants and a hotel near the intersection of Post Oak and San Felipe.

'Pocket park' planned

City officials and leaders of the Uptown Redevelopment Authority, a quasi-governmental entity associated with the Uptown TIRZ, said part of the land was needed to widen San Felipe. The

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rest, less than a tenth of an acre, will be used for a "pocket park" that will provide badly needed green space in the area, the officials said.

TIRZ funds are tax revenues set aside for improvements in a particular area. John Breeding, president of the Uptown Houston District, said he expects the road widening to be finished by next March and the park to be developed by the summer.

The amount of the settlement is less than the \$1.4 million Wulfe offered the brothers for the property in 2006, an offer they refused because they wanted a lump sum rather than payments over several years. However, it's more than twice the \$433,800 that the city asserted the land was worth in December 2006, the agreed-upon date for settlement discussions, Gray said.

Helped close a big deal

The brothers contended the land was worth \$1,012,000, Gray said.

The Collins brothers, along with leaders of some government watchdog groups, contended the park was a pretext for providing a landscaped entrance to Wulfe's development at public expense. Documents obtained by the Houston Chronicle last year showed that the condemnation helped Wulfe close a \$12.5 million land deal for a planned residential tower within the development, although plans for that project have been delayed because of the recession.

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White repeatedly denied that political considerations were a factor. The need for land to widen San Felipe wasn't disputed, and White said it was a better deal for taxpayers for the city to take the entire parcel.

Wulfe, through his attorney, has denied asking the city to take the property. Wulfe has donated \$ 10,000 to White's mayoral campaigns since 2005.

The Collins brothers could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

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