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Monks bless International District project



GILBERT W. ARIAS / P-I PHOTOS

The Venerable Thich Minh Chieu, a Vietnamese monk, sprinkles holy water at the old Metro bus barn at Eighth Avenue South and South Dearborn Street during ceremonies yesterday marking the start of the International District Village Square project.

Cleanup is first step in \$21 million plan

By GIL BAILEY
PI REPORTER

The bare parking lot and the foundations for the old bus barn on the southeast edge of Seattle's International District have endured the drip, drip, drip of gasoline, leaded and unleaded, and other chemical mixtures for 50 years or so.

The pollutants have soaked into 30 feet of clay and even into the underground water table.

Yesterday, three Buddhist monks knelt before a small table and chanted. Then they led a march around the property scattering holy water and waving willow branches.

The ceremony started the purification and cleansing of land that will become the \$21 million International District Village Square.



Monks Khun Houn, left, Thich Minh Chieu and Phouvanh Xayaouthone perform a Buddhist cleansing ceremony.

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Ceremony: Metro donated land for project

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The 150,000-square-foot area at the northeast corner of Eighth Avenue South and South Dearborn Street was once used by Metro for a bus maintenance facility, and before that by private bus and taxi companies.

A \$1.6 million pollution clean-up project will see the earth on the site picked up, "cooked" to purification and then returned to the land. Metro donated the property and is paying for the removal of the pollutants, a Metro spokeswoman said.

Civic and International District leaders were on hand along with the monks — the Venerable Khun Houn, a Cambodian; the Venerable Phouvanh Xayaouthone, Laotian; and the Venerable Thich Minh Chieu, Vietnamese — yesterday afternoon to celebrate the symbolic start of the project.

Construction will begin in mid-1996 on 75 apartments for low-income elderly residents who need assisted living services. Offices will be provided for five community-based nonprofit agencies to serve more than 40 different ethnic groups.

"We first thought of this in 1974," said Bob Santos, unofficial mayor of the International District and now an official with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Dennis Okamoto, vice president-Washington for U.S. West Communications and co-chairman of the Village Square Capital Campaign, said \$9 million already has been raised toward the \$21 million goal of paying for the development.

"We will start our campaign aimed at individuals shortly," he added.

Total project funding is estimated at \$7 million from Seattle, King County and state governments, \$7.6 million in tax-exempt bonds, \$5 million from a capital campaign and \$1.2 million from other private sources including foundations.

The Seattle Chinatown-International District Preservation and Development Authority is the owner and developer of the project.

The project will open in mid-1997, according to Wendy Watanabe, spokeswoman for the district.

"This area will be good in the future," said Chieu as he gave the land a final blessing.