

phantom firm of land gobbling

By ^{Scient.} HOWARD FRENCH
Sun staff writer

An unnamed, \$2 billion corporation has been making a bid to control Clearwater real estate by buying more than 300 parcels of property since 1973, according to Heber C. Jentzsch, international president of the Church of Scientology.

And when the church began buying downtown property in 1975, he said, that phantom corporation began a campaign to discredit the church and to keep property values low until it could complete its own acquisition program.

"We must have cut across the plans of that major corporation," he said.

But Jentzsch would not name the company, other than to say it is an out-of-state company with holdings in about four states. He said, however, he is convinced the company is involved in a deliberate effort to drive down property values in downtown Clearwater.

Jentzsch's remarks came during a press conference Wednesday in the ballroom of the former Fort Harrison Hotel, used as an international training center by the sect since it took over the building in 1975.

Downtown Development Board Chairman Allan Bomstein dismissed Jentzsch's claims, saying it's impossible for a group to control property values.

Jentzsch went on to say that it is more than coincidence that while the city's population and general economic indicators continue to rise, plans to revitalize downtown Clearwater consistently are frustrated.



HEBER JENTZSCH

He said the church will continue an investigation into the matter, and may announce the company's identity within the next three weeks.

Bomstein called the sect's allegations "absolutely amazing." Even if some group were able to control property values, he said, the sect also would benefit, whether values rise or fall.

Because the sect still is required to pay taxes, he said, lower property values would mean lower taxes. And if land values are forced up, Bomstein noted, the sect would benefit by higher resale prices in the future, just like other downtown landowners.

"It is impossible for anyone to manipulate property values," he said. "Every effort to put together (development) in the downtown

(Please see * SECT. next page)

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* Sect

(from page 1A)

area is so hard ... anyone on the outside saying someone is trying to adjust property values is out of touch."

Pinellas County Property Appraiser Ron Schultz also was skeptical of the sect's claims.

"I don't believe it," Schultz said. "(The church) is the biggest single owner of property in downtown Clearwater."

On another issue, Jentzsch accused the city of Clearwater of shutting the church out of meaningful dialogue about a proposed waterfront preservation plan. The project, which goes to the voters in a Dec. 4 referendum, tentatively includes the purchase of the former Sand Castle Motel, which belongs to the sect.

He said the city should be making an effort to involve property owners in the plan, and should be thinking in terms of at least \$15 million for the Sand Castle site. Most recent city estimates, on the other hand, have placed a price of

\$3 million on the acquisition and development of parkland and a marina on the site.

The bayfront project tentatively includes massive landscaping and park expansion between Chesnut Street on the south and Drew Street on the north. The Sand Castle project is envisioned as providing additional parkland, and as a base for a 90-slip marina.

The plan would cost up to \$12 million if approved by voters in a Dec. 4 referendum, city planners estimated.

But sect spokesmen consistently maintain that the site is not for sale, and that it is needed to provide space for sect members.

However, Bomstein, who has been active in the early development of the bayfront plan, said the acquisition of the Sand Castle site is not vital to the success of the project.

And Longrange Waterfront Planning Committee Chairman Wray Register said the sect has

been kept informed about the bayfront proposal, along with the rest of the property owners and the public.

"They're not in any different position than anyone else," she said. "And we're not trying to get them to leave town—that's not our intent at all."

In fact, she said, there had been a meeting scheduled for Wednesday morning with sect leaders, which was cancelled by the church.

The press conference was the second in as many weeks held by the local Scientologists. The first was held Aug. 1 to urge city officials to reconsider an ordinance providing for the regulation of charitable solicitations.

The city and the sect are in court over that law which requires non-profit groups to register with the city and file financial reports. The constitutionality of the basic ordinance has been upheld in local district court, but is still pending before federal appellate court in Atlanta.