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said. "It's quite unusual, but I guess it's because of the deep pockets of the developer."

The Westlake City Council will vote tomorrow night on whether to seize about 40 acres needed for the highway project. The Fort Worth City Council is expected to consider seizing a nearby 7-acre tract within a couple of weeks.

Perot said he never has indemnified a government agency against lawsuits to complete a business deal, and he agreed that it was a novel variation on his favorite theme of cooperation between the public and private sectors.

He made the offer of indemnity in this case, he said, because one landowner in question — a relative of former billionaire Nelson Bunker Hunt — is perceived as particularly prone to suing.

"It would be a groundless, worthless lawsuit," Perot said. "But we're paying for it, and we're going to get it done."

Hunt, before going bankrupt in 1988, worked with Perot to plan the new $23 million highway. Known as Texas 170, the highway is designed to extend northeast from Alliance Airport and pass near the Circle T Ranch, a vast development site that Hunt later lost in bankruptcy.

In 1985, the two tycoons set up Dedication Corp., a non-profit company, to acquire all the land needed for the highway. The company's donation of 430 acres this spring to the state was hailed as the largest such donation in recent Texas history.

But Albert Huddleston, who is married to Hunt's daughter, Mary, has balked at donating or selling about 40 acres that he and his wife control immediately west of the Circle T — the land Westlake is eyeing for condemnation.

In a recent interview, Huddleston said he was undecided about whether to file suit if Westlake seized the land, which is part of a 500-acre tract held in a trust with Hunt's three other children.

Huddleston cited a disagreement with Perot on the highway design as his reason for not cooperating on the project. If the highway is constructed the way it is currently designed, Huddleston said, his property adjacent to it will lose value.

Hunt's 37-year-old son-in-law also accused Perot of taking over the project for his own benefit since Hunt went bankrupt two years ago.

"I didn't have any problem with him until we were perceived as weaklings," he said.

Perot rejected the notion that he has tried to take over the highway project for personal gain. He said Huddleston is trying to coerce him after representatives of the trust originally agreed to cooperate with Dedication Corp.

"Albert has been the one who's been the problem on the whole deal," Perot said. "He's the one who just gums up the works."

Houston Hunt, son of Bunker Hunt, said he and his other siblings disagree with Huddleston's land holdout and have filed a civil lawsuit to extricate themselves from the dispute.

The lawsuit in Tarrant County District Court, Hunt said, is the sort of action taken "if you've got partners you don't get along with."

Huddleston contends that the lawsuit is his relatives' attempt to avoid confrontation with Perot. He said it also is intended to address a larger problem — a commingling of assets that has been common in the Hunt family, he said, and now is recognized as a mistake.

As Huddleston put it: "If one party did something wrong, he'd drag the other down with him."

Westlake Planning Commissioner Scott Bradley said the seizure of Huddleston's property would not be possible without Perot's unusual support. Westlake is a rural community that collects no property taxes, he said, and has an annual budget of $12,000.

"The only way we would do it was if he would bear all the costs," Bradley added.

Huddleston, who married Mary Hunt in 1977, said he was assigned by Nelson Bunker Hunt to work on the Texas 170 project as part of his contribution to the family business — building infrastructure around the Circle T in case Hunt decided to sell that property.

"I had a carte blanche," the son-in-law said.

Dean Flowers, a real estate broker who had worked on the land acquisitions for Dedication Corp., said he credits Perot in large part with making the Texas 170 project possible.

Flowers, whose brother is married to one of Hunt's other daughters, said he has not been involved in the project for a couple of years but was aware of the dispute between Perot and Huddleston.

"I consider them both as friends," he added. "It's a real messy situation."