



VERONICA ESCOBAR
El Paso County Judge

March 25, 2011

The Honorable John F. Cook, Mayor and
El Paso City Council
One Civic Center Plaza
El Paso, Texas 79901

Honorable Mayor and Council:

I write to share my perspective on the Transmountain I-10 project and the Northwest Master Plan.

I support the transportation infrastructure investment at Transmountain Road. I support it because of its focus on safety and added capacity, and because it is an integral part of the community initiative begun several years ago to create a traffic loop addressing congestion within El Paso.

What concerns me, however, is the Paseo del Norte overpass and its relationship to future development in the open space adjacent to it.

As I understand it, the Paseo del Norte overpass will help provide connectivity to and traffic distribution for future development, especially in the acreage now owned by the people of El Paso (via the PSB) but slated for development in the PSB's Northwest Master Plan.

During the recent public hearing on the project a member of the public expressed the opinion that if the area within the Northwest Master Plan were to remain undeveloped – preserved in perpetuity as open space by the City Council and the PSB – there probably would be no need for the final overpass. I believe that assessment was accurate.

While the PSB has been supportive of using SmartCode for the development, that property still belongs to the public. In their resolution (attached), the PSB states:

WHEREAS, the PSB carefully manages its assets which include lands held in trust for the benefit of the water and wastewater system, for the benefit of its ratepayers so as to maximize water, wastewater service and storm water management and safety.

That acreage is indeed an asset that needs to be managed. It needs to be managed through thoughtful public policy. And while development would certainly increase the tax base, it would also increase demands on services and infrastructure funded by local property taxpayers. More important, it would erode precious open space that should remain in its natural state.

In the introduction to the City of El Paso's Green Infrastructure Plan, there is an acknowledgement of the need for preservation:

The mountains, the desert, the river...El Paso wouldn't be the same without them. Yet as the City grows, the special places our families remember are disappearing one by one. The El Paso Open Space Plan seeks to preserve some of those special places, so that future generations have a city that is vibrant, beautiful, and truly one of best places to live on this planet.

The amount of remaining undeveloped land in El Paso and in El Paso County is rapidly decreasing – Of the 224 square miles within the City of El Paso (after excluding the Franklin Mountains), only 50 square miles, or less than 23%, remain largely undeveloped. Of the 1057 square miles in El Paso County, less than 250 square miles remain largely undeveloped or unused for military purposes. Land for open space must be preserved today, or it will be consumed over the next 20 to 40 years.

(http://www.ci.el-paso.tx.us/parks/_documents/green/_documents/draft%20plan/7_Chapter1%20Introduction.pdf)

Access to open space – the arroyos, natural and man-made trails, and the wildlife and flora that come with it – is of significant value to a community that has limited park space, a population that grapples with obesity and diabetes, and leadership that wants El Paso to be a leading American City once again. Protecting open space addresses all those issues.

Unfortunately, our community has the dubious distinction of not protecting or preserving what makes us special and unique.

Between the late 1800s and 1920s, for example, El Paso built some of the most impressive, beautiful and unique architecture in the United States. Downtown El Paso was rising, with San Jacinto Plaza at the heart of it. With respect to our downtown, my generation has seen it all: abandonment, divestment, decline, renewed interest, and now, finally, re-investment that is igniting our much-deserved and sought-after renaissance. Those of us who acknowledge the role history plays in our success have lamented the loss of too many architectural treasures – either to disrepair or demolition.

Recent (and significant) investment in the Mills Building is transforming the area that was the nucleus of our city. A renewed and very welcome interest in reviving San Jacinto Plaza has recently arisen largely because many people recognize San Jacinto Plaza as an important symbol of El Paso's splendid past and as a logical starting point for that renaissance so many of us are working toward.

It is with this perspective that I urge you to more fully evaluate the Paseo del Norte component of the Transmountain project and your commitment to natural open space. Once destroyed, open space can never be recovered. The decisions you make will forever change the landscape so many of us love – landscape that it is not an exaggeration to say shapes El Paso's identity. It is completely within your power to save this open space.

I am keenly interested in progress, infrastructure investment and community advancement – my record as an elected official makes that abundantly clear. However, I believe that to forge ahead on this project without protecting what makes us unique and beautiful is short-sighted. Just as my generation wondered why El Pasoans accepted policies that made us a low-wage town, encouraged divestment in our downtown and central core, and displaced us from our position as a leading American City, our children will wonder why we didn't do everything possible to preserve the natural treasures of our arroyos and the foothills near them.

Sincerely,



Veronica Escobar

El Paso County Judge

cc: Ted Houghton, TxDOT Commissioner
Chuck Berry, District Engineer, TxDOT
Roy Gilyard, Executive Director, Metropolitan Planning Organization
Edmund G. Archuleta, President and CEO, El Paso Water Utilities
The Honorable Inocente Quintanilla, State Representative, District 75
The Honorable Naomi Gonzalez, State Representative, District 76
The Honorable Marisa Marquez, State Representative, District 77
The Honorable Dee Margo, State Representative, District 78
The Honorable Joe C. Pickett, State Representative, District 79
The Honorable Jose Rodriguez, State Senator, District 29