



EL PASO'S ORIGINAL NEWS SOURCE

2 Countries, 3 Cities Take Stand Against ASARCO, ASARCO Fights Back

by Rene Leon

The governing bodies of three sister cities in the Borderland – El Paso, Sunland Park, N.M., and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico – came together Thursday morning in a historic joint meeting to discuss several issues facing their communities, chief among them being the possible reopening of ASARCO.

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The governing bodies of three sister cities in the Borderland – El Paso, Sunland Park, N.M., and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico – came together Thursday morning in a historic joint meeting to discuss several issues facing their communities, chief among them being the possible reopening of ASARCO. The mayors and their respective city councils held the meeting before several other elected officials, community leaders and members of the public and media at Monument 1, the area near the Rio Grande banks where the two countries' and three cities' borders converge.



The unprecedented ceremony was presided over by Dr. Tony Payan, an assistant professor of international law and foreign policy in UTEP's political science department.

In convening the meeting, Payan told the councils and audience, both in English and Spanish, just how the gathering would proceed: each government was to commence its meeting according to its own protocols and traditions, Ciudad Juarez first, Sunland Park second, and El Paso third; then the joint meeting would be open to discussion and action regarding the various chosen topics.

A Mexican honor guard opened Juarez's council meeting, during which Mexican citizens stood in absolute reverence with a one-hand salute held over their hearts.

El Paso's council meeting was opened with a performance of the national anthem by city engineering department employee Denise Baisely.

After each council formally convened, they began to debate the selected issues, the first being that of ASARCO.

The Juarez council debated and quickly voted to join its sister cities in an official stance against ASARCO's air permit renewal. The Sunland Park and El Paso councils followed suit, entering into an unprecedented bi-national agreement against what many claim is an outdated industry that will have a negative impact on the region.

Sunland Park Mayor Ruben Segura stated that his city is a fast-growing municipality in one of the fastest-growing counties in New Mexico and that it has become a hotspot for tourism and entertainment in the area.

"This is our lifeline in regards to our municipality," he said. "I ask members of council and members of the public that we unite as a community" against ASARCO, Segura added.

El Paso Mayor John Cook told the delegations that while ASARCO is located in the state of Texas and the city of El Paso, it has an impact on Sunland Park and Ciudad Juarez as well.

The delegations heard from State Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, who was in favor of the resolution, and they also heard from Dr. John Haines, a toxicology expert who spoke on the alleged health hazards he said would be posed by ASARCO emitting of several tons of pollutants into the air annually.

"Arsenic, Cadmium, Lead – 3 pollutants present at all smelters I've ever been to," Haynes said.

Haynes, the son a mining engineer, also said that El Paso has the highest level of lead contamination ever encountered in a community in North America. He said the contamination was accidentally discovered by a pediatrician, and that the effects of elevated lead levels can be devastating to children, especially neurologically.

The harmful effects of arsenic, a known carcinogen that can cause gastrointestinal and blood disorders, and cadmium, a heavy metal that has become a recent interest of toxicologists, were also detailed to the delegations.

"What we see as a hazard today may be obvious tomorrow," Haynes warned. "What we imply today may be obvious tomorrow."

Possible Economic Impact

Just one day prior, ASARCO held a press conference on the grounds of the smelter to announce the findings of an economic impact

study conducted through UTEP's Institute for Policy and Economic Development (IPED).

The study claims that the El Paso area will gain a total of 6.25 new jobs for every job created by the re-opening of ASARCO. With ASARCO planning to create over 300 new jobs at the smelter, the job creation spin-off would equal 1,819 new jobs throughout the region.

Additionally, the study states that regional economic output would increase by \$1.159 billion and generate \$73 million in new labor income.

The backdrop of the press conference, behind a vinyl banner saying "let's get to work", was a green area of land between the smelter entrance and I-10, not the actual operations facilities and towering smokestack.

Tom Aldrich, Vice President of Environmental Affairs for ASARCO, said the copper smelter would be a valuable asset to the El Paso community and not cause any harm.

"The community is not being asked to trade air quality for economic prosperity," Aldrich stated. "There is nothing about this smelter that we would expect to be any different."

Responding to claims that the smelter would drive away newer jobs in other industries, such as the technology field, Aldrich said he believes that ASARCO can coexist with those other industries. "Part of our labor pool we'll be looking at is the tech industry," he added.

But Mayor Cook disagrees that the economic impact of ASARCO re-opening would be a positive one.

"We could make a lot of money in El Paso by legalizing prostitution, but I don't think we want to take that bold step," Cook said during the special council meeting.

Danny Arrellano, a former employee at ASARCO for 24 years, agrees with Cook. He said the wages paid to workers is not something that will benefit the community.

"A lot of us came out sick," he said. To pay for medical bills associated with a blood disorder her claims is a result of working at ASARCO, Arrellano said he and other employees have had to sell a lot of the properties they have accumulated through the years.

"What did we gain," he asked.

Communities vs. Corporation

ASARCO officials, in response to the special city council meeting and the resolutions adopted by the city governments, claimed that the resolutions contained misleading and false information about the community's health.

According to Lairy Johnson, the plant's environmental manager, "air emissions from ASARCO have been scientifically proven to be safe and will not cause or contribute to air pollution in our community."

Johnson also stated that ASARCO is a "great place to work and all of the employees want clean air where they work, live and play."

He contends that the resolutions passed ignored the investigations conducted by local, state and environmental departments and other institutions.

But a point was clearly made at the special council meeting: the communities and their leaders do not want this industry in the middle of their cities.

Segura stated that the cities of El Paso, Sunland Park and Juarez must cooperate to resolve important issues because of their proximity. "We're forced and encouraged to work together because of our mere geography," he said.

Cook agreed that bi-national cooperation should be the aim of the three governments. "That should be the goal," he stated, "a day when we could truly live without borders."

Rene Leon can be contacted at rene@newspapertree.com

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