

El Paso's future has no place for Asarco

By John Cook / Guest columnist
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The city of El Paso is in the midst of an unprecedented boom.

The federal government recognized the city's many quality-of-life attributes when it focused on El Paso as an area of growth during the Base Realignment and Closure process in 2005.

The state of Texas recognized the potential of El Paso when it approved the construction of the country's second new medical school in more than 25 years and the only medical school on an international border.

Housing starts are exploding. Commercial construction is at near-record levels.

El Paso is racing into the new century as a major metropolitan player.

With its sister city of Ciudad Juárez, El Paso is emerging as a shining beacon of the future. The combined international population is approaching 3 million.

The sun is shining on El Paso. Our city's future is indeed bright.

However, all of the good work that got us where we are today, and which promises to take us even further, is threatened by a single proposal: the proposed reopening of the Asarco smelter.

Some have asked why there is such strong opposition to Asarco.

If you're curious, I am pleased to announce that you can go to the city Web site and view a new video that makes it clear why Asarco is not right for El Paso. The video is posted on the city's web site: www.elpasotexas.gov

I am especially proud of the municipal employees who worked with our legal counsel to tell the city's story in such a compelling fashion.

Until you have a chance to view the video, the short story is that Asarco is a part of El Paso's rich heritage. But so is the horse cavalry of the U.S. Army.

Both are to be celebrated as part of the fabric that made El Paso what it is today, but neither is a part of the modern El Paso. Lead and arsenic emissions in Downtown El Paso are as out of place in 2007 as a saber-led cavalry charge through the streets of our modern city.

The 800-foot Asarco smokestack is a historical monument to the past. Copper smelters are not the centerpiece for modern American cities.

Asarco should not be allowed to reopen because of the threat it poses to public health, its record of repeated non-compliance with state environmental statutes, and widespread public opposition, including international opposition.

It is difficult to take seriously Asarco's sunny predictions of how it will economically benefit the city with new jobs, tax revenue, etc. when the company is in such poor financial condition that it filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

Asarco has already lost its case before two state administrative law judges, where the city of El Paso proved that Asarco's record of non-compliance made it unworthy to hold a state air emissions permit.

Asarco was delinquent in paying its property taxes, but when that became known to the public, it somehow found the money to pay, even though it is in bankruptcy. Asarco has demonstrated that it is a bad corporate citizen.

To date, the TCEQ has received more than 9,600 letters opposing the reopening of Asarco. While that's more than 10 times the number of those claiming to support Asarco, we can't afford to let the Asarco advertising campaign offset the wishes of our citizens.

To keep El Paso moving forward, it is imperative that its citizens call and write Gov. Rick Perry and the TCEQ and let them know that while the Asarco smelter is part of our city's past, it must not be a part of our future.

The message must be clear: Please Don't Allow Asarco to Restart.

There should be no confusion.

El Paso is proud of its industrial economic base and supports the businesses that are such a vital part of our community and our future prosperity. El Paso welcomes and embraces industry, but it must be industry that plays by the rules and makes a positive contribution.

Asarco is not one of those businesses.

Permitting Asarco to reopen will take El Paso back to a place in time that we neither want nor deserve. We must not allow that happen.

John Cook is mayor of El Paso.

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