

Uniting Two Countries

El Rio Libre

**Amusement Park
International Roller Coaster
Restaurants
Shops
Museums**

By Ruby Sosa

Community Scholars

July 28, 2000

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"El Rio Libre"

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Imagine for a minute that you are standing right next to the Rio Grande, looking at both El Paso and Juarez. Instead of seeing fences, border patrol agents, and other signs of division that mar the landscape now, visualize shops, restaurants, park benches, trees, and walkways crowding both sides of the river. Imagine mariachis wondering up and down the banks, children laughing in the nearby amusement park, passersby chattering in multiple languages while strolling back and forth over pedestrian bridges from Juarez to El Paso.

With hard work, dedication, and commitment, the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo waterfront could be a place of pride and a destination for visitors, rather than an eyesore. This area would be "El Rio Libre," the free river.

This zone could be called "El Rio Libre." It could be a place where people enjoy themselves and spend time with friends and family. The riverfront could be a vibrant meeting place for Ciudad Juarez and El Paso. Such a communion is important because it reflects the reality that the two cities are really one.

The river has been a point of division since February 2, 1848 when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed, signifying "peace, friendship, limits, and settlements" between the U.S. and Mexico (Monterrey). It was established to put an end to the Mexican War (1846-1848), which started because Texans were unhappy with Mexican rule. The treaty established the Rio Grande River as the international boundary between Mexico and Texas. The boundary was originally set up to solve problems, ease pain, and prevent any future problems. However, instead of uniting the sister cities, it has divided them.

There would be much work to get it done. Permission would be needed from Immigration and Customs officials to push their checkpoints off the riverfront to create a zone of free movement. Parking, flood planes, and nearby neighborhoods would have to be considered in addition to a host of other details.

This report focuses on the vision for El Rio Libre, some of the challenges faced in implementing it, and models to follow.

San Antonio Leads the Way

San Antonio's River Walk is a destination for thousands of visitors every year. Paseo Del Rio (the River Walk) is an approximately two-mile stretch of riverfront that has shops, restaurants, theaters, and tropical trees. Its development began decades ago and reflects the payoff that a long-term vision can have on a community. San Antonio lacks the oil wealth of Houston, the financial force and professional football team of Dallas, the political cleverness of Austin, the leisure of Fort Worth, and the seclusion of El Paso (Metz 236). Yet it has the ability to be a magnet for more tourists than any other city in the state.

In 1939, San Antonio began developing its riverbank (Metz 236). The issue arose from the community's concern of the rising crime rate and pollution around the river (Salsido). There were two distinct solutions: Cement the river or develop it (Salsido). The process and planning for the River Walk – which should guide the development in El Paso of El Rio Libre – included the following:

- ❑ Acquiring approval for the project
- ❑ Funding
- ❑ Attracting commerce
- ❑ Flooding issues
- ❑ Security and management

In 1929 when Architect Robert Hugman had a meeting with commissioners, civic leaders, and property owners to discuss the plans he had to improve the river (Hurd). Hugman's proposal finally gained support almost 10 years after it was proposed. A bond issue was approved enabling San Antonio to get a federal grant through the Works Projects Administration (Hurd). San Antonio then conducted a \$15,000 feasibility study to determine how to develop the riverfront. The Tourist Attractions Development Committee raised half of what the study cost and the other half was raised by the city.

In 1962, business leader David Straus set up a River Walk Commission to advise the City's Department of Housing and Building Inspections on all matters concerning improvements on the river (Hurd). From 1963 to 1968, to attract commerce, he also got together property owners and business people to make up the River Walk Commission and the Paseo Del Rio Association. These two organizations served to plan and organize how the River Walk would function. Straus, committee members, and other planners presented plans and models in many meetings to potential business tenants, civic leaders, and most importantly to the community to educate them on the importance of developing the river (Hurd).

When it came to funding, the public sector was getting involved and began to see the vision. In January 1964, voters approved a \$300,000 bond issue (Hurd). This money was dedicated to improve the river. The private sector began to purchase and build along the river. The Paseo Del Rio Association and private organizations took on the responsibility to commercialize the River Walk. Community Development Block

Grants and Bond Issues in 1980 through 1985 gathered \$18 million for major developments along the River Walk (Hurd). The City of San Antonio, U.S. Corps of Engineers, and San Antonio River Authority joined forces throughout many years and built walkways, walls, fences, streets, drainage structures, pedestrian bridges, park facilities, and landscaping (Hurd).

In February 1988, the Rivercenter, a \$200 million public/private development project was made possible by a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development grant and the sale of Certificates of Obligation (Hurd). Now the river walk consists of hundreds of shops, restaurants, two department stores, and a 1,000-room, 42-story Marriott Hotel. This project also set up lighting and water features.

San Antonio did not succeed without first having problems. There were many floods along the river, so to solve it they created the San Antonio/San Pedro Creek Tunnel project (Hurd). It consisted of two flood control tunnels, the San Antonio River Tunnel and the San Pedro Creek Tunnel.

To enforce security, a Park Rangers Patrol was set up (Hurd). They are available 24 hours a day and are responsible for tourist security, public property, and monitoring compliance with established River Walk Policy Guidelines. They also set up a Parks and Recreation Department to maintain the public park areas (Hurd). The Parks and Recreation Department is responsible for the area from the River walk all the way to the Alamo.

The River Walk is just one of San Antonio's attractions. There's the Alamo, Fiesta Texas, Sea World, museums and fiestas.

While San Antonio has must to teach El Paso about developing its riverfront, the vision for El Rio Libre is not just to copy San Antonio. The focus of El Rio Libre would be the celebration of the share culture and language of El Paso and Juarez. Juarez and El Paso's joint history and culture would be natural themes. For instance, the first mission built in North America is located in Juarez and others are in El Paso. The First Thanksgiving took place in the Mission Valley. Even though San Antonio is approximately 150 miles away from Mexico, it calls itself a border town (Metz 236). It has capitalized on its Mexican connections – though they are distant – more than El Paso has.

Lessons From Other Projects

There have been and are other develop projects along the river. The World Trade Center developed a plan to construct a bi-national World Trade Center office building. The buildings – an El Paso–Juarez Interplex – would have been located on both sides of the river (Mares). The concept was to create a circular office building with one half on American soil and the other on Mexican soil. A bridge with a Port of Entry would have connected the complex, meaning that crossers would be checked for

citizenship when they walked from one building to the other (Mares). Elia Mares Purdy, executive director of the World Trade Center, said the project never got beyond the drawing board for a variety of reasons, including funding and governmental barriers.

Another project focused on developing the Chamizal area. In 1996, a community economic analysis by the Chamizal Planning Program suggested developing a plan to allow U.S. and Mexican citizens to come together to enjoy the park (Valencia).

Nestor Valencia, vice president for planning at the El Paso Community Foundation, was one of the creators of this "free zone" idea. It consisted of relocating the Ports of Entry along the new river channel that was created as a result of the Chamizal settlement of 1963 (El Paso, Summary Report). However, the project wasn't implemented because of obstacles posed by the U.S. government, which did not appreciate the value of the concept (Valencia).

The City of El Paso's Department of Research and Development is planning the development of a pedestrian and bicycle trail along the U.S. side of the Rio Grande (Rosales). The walking trail will extend to different parts of El Paso. The first phase of the project is projected to be in the Upper Valley and is estimated to cost \$750,000. This idea is one phase of a City Planning Department's Comprehensive Plan. The entire trail project will cost \$9 million (Rosales). The land for the project has been bought and is ready to be developed. This walking trail will only be on the El Paso side of the river, however, and will not include connections to the Juarez side.

Chip Johns and Sonny Cenicerros from La Hacienda Restaurant near Downtown also had a project in the works. They had a river park concept in mind that was to be built around La Hacienda area. They had the plans and some of the funding ready to start the project. The private sector contributed preliminary funds, and a board of interested people contributed to the planning and design. The cost of the project was to be \$2.4 million. Unfortunately, they were not able to raise the money needed to initiate the project (Cenicerros).

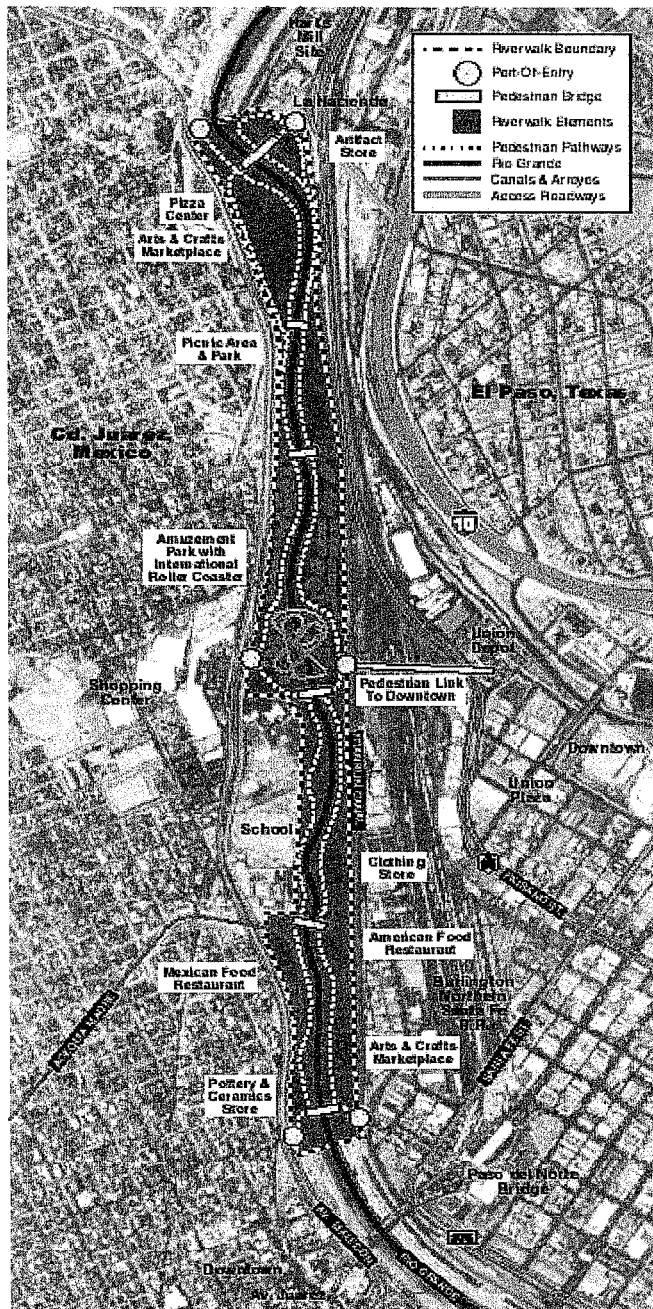
Is It Worth Another Attempt?

There are many issues to be addressed in deciding whether to pursue El Rio Libre. Where will the Ports of Entry be? Who will provide public safety resources? How will Juarez and El Paso work together to create the project?

El Rio Libre would be an international free zone in which pedestrians could roam back and forth across the river without needing proof of citizenship, so long as they remain in the zone. If they want leave the free zone, they would have to comply with Customs and Immigration inspection procedures. No cars would be allowed to enter the free zone. They would be parked in a designated areas outside the zone.

A map of what El Rio Libre could look like is below. The yellow dots represent the pedestrian Ports of Entries. Shops and restaurants line the riverbanks. The main attraction of the zone is an amusement park that features an international roller coaster, which would take riders from one country to the other in seconds.

El Rio Libre



Vision: Ruby Sosa, Community Scholars
Map: buddha head arts

As you enter the "free zone" area you will come upon small stone walkways connecting all of the facilities. You will find trees and plants everywhere beautifying the area. Benches will be found throughout the park. On both sides of the river there will be shopping stores and restaurants. Walking bridges will connect the two sides. Juarez would develop its side; El Paso would develop its side. The design concepts could be unified or diverse.

Location

Three locations emerged as possible sites for El Rio Libre. They were the Mission Valley, the Chamizal, and the west side of Downtown. In examining these possible sites, Community Scholars considered available land on each side of the river, sufficient roads to sustain traffic around the zone, and the level of commercialization of adjacent properties.

The Mission Valley, which includes the areas of Socorro and San Elizario, was a possibility because of its historical features and proximity to the river. There is plenty of open space in this area (Rosales). The impact on nearby residential areas would likely be minimal. The biggest drawback to this location was its remoteness from the hub of the city, which could limit the amount and types of businesses that would want to locate in the free zone.

The Chamizal area has a history of unification. The Chamizal Treaty of 1963 formalized the international boundary between the United States and Mexico. The Chamizal area would be a cost effective place to build because it is already developed on both sides of the border. The Chamizal area in Juarez is very "pretty and nicely developed," said Elia Mares Purdy of the World Trade Center. Another advantage to building on the Chamizal area is the amount of available park space for development (Mares). However, there are residential areas close to the El Paso side of the Chamizal, and this could be a source of conflict with the residents (Briones). Tanny Berg, a Downtown business owner, said the Chamizal area lacked the commercial aspect needed to attract businesses. He also pointed out that the portion of the river that runs through the Chamizal area has been paved with concrete, which makes it an unattractive site. The biggest obstacle is that the Chamizal Park is designated as a National Park, which would make it impossible to develop as a free zone (Briones).

That leaves the west side of Downtown near La Hacienda Restaurant as the most suitable place for this project. The heart of both cities is nearby. The area can feed off of the Union Plaza development and the University of Texas at El Paso on the El Paso side and the pedestrian traffic of both downtown El Paso and Juarez. On the Juarez side, a significant drawback is the proximity of nearby residences, the owners of which might not appreciate a bustling commercial area in their backyards.

Architecto Luis Felipe Sigueiros, an urban developer for the Municipal Institute of Investigation and Planning for Juarez, Mexico, said he thinks that an urban area such

as downtown is the optimal location for El Rio Libre. Elia Mares Purdy said that the only issue that might pose a conflict is the lack of infrastructure plans for such a project. Mares said it will take a lot of planning on both sides of the border.

El Paso's Downtown Redevelopment will "fit right in" with El Rio Libre because it would create a "partnership impact," said Michael Breigtnier, executive director for El Paso Central Business Association. The cultural and historic characteristics of the area will help enhance El Rio Libre. For example, Harts Mill, which was constructed in 1851, is the oldest building in use in El Paso. Don Juan De Onate crossed the river through that area en route to northern New Mexico in 1598 (Burrus).

Sonny Cenicerros, director of operations at La Hacienda Restaurant, said that El Rio Libre would enhance the area and the restaurant. The proximity to Interstate 10 and other major arteries make it an ideal location.

Advantages

This project will bring two communities together by creating a common area for their residents and visitors to enjoy. Architect Luis Felipe Siqueiros said he thinks this integrate the two countries by providing a united recreational area. Some of the international outcomes of having El Rio Libre are better relations with our sister city and the promotion of our uniqueness (Breitinger).

Tanny Berg said he thinks the project would develop a "collective consciousness in the community." It would be promising for entrepreneurs looking for a unique opportunity. The bi-national aspect will be a draw for shoppers, diners, and businesses (Berg).

The benefits of tourism and the creation of jobs resulting from this project will help El Paso and Juarez economically (Garcia). The integration of commerce between Mexico and the U.S. will be advantage for El Rio Libre (Mares). The handcrafters and restaurant chains will come from all over Mexico and U.S. to enlarge the vision of international business and to expand and globalize their trade (Mares).

Nestor Valencia said El Rio Libre will, "allow people to interrelate without the stigma of boundaries and will change the way the border is viewed."

Challenges

The difficulty of this project cannot be underestimated. "On a scale of one to 10, this project rates 10 on the level of difficulty" said Danny Vickers, chief executive officer of EDM International. Part of the reason is because El Paso has a history of non-progressive thinking (Vickers). Therefore, in order to initiate such a project it is crucial to arrive at a consensus among all of the parties involved, including all levels of

government on both sides of the border. There is a need for leadership (Vickers). These people have the potential and ability to cause a real difference in the progress of any development along the riverfront.

Some of the major obstacles are all the federal agency jurisdictions (Rosales). Trying to communicate with each is difficult. If the experience of Community Scholars is any indication, finding the right people to talk to at the Comision Internacional de Limites Y Aguas, which is the International Boundary and Water Commission's counterpart in Juarez, and getting them to return calls was a challenge.

The International Boundary and Water Commission administers most of the floodplain areas along the Rio Grande. A floodplain is an area designated to prevent damages in case the river overflows. The Boundary Commission prohibits any permanent improvements on these areas. Permits to build on these areas would only be licensed if the structures are not subject to flood damage and are flood proof in accordance with the Unified National Program for Flood Plain Management of the Water Resources Council (International Boundary and Water Commission, General Instructions).

An issue of greater concern, however, is not flooding but lack of water in the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo. Manuel Rubio, realty officer for the International and Water Commission, says that the water is seasonal, which means the riverbed can be dry under certain conditions.

The issue of the pedestrian Ports of Entry would require a request from the Secretary of Treasury of both the U.S. and Mexico. The project would have to be on their Top 10 lists in order for it to receive any attention. This process can take up to 10 years (Maier).

There is a fence all along the Rio Grande that makes the area unattractive and "ugly" to tourists and residents in El Paso (Rosales). Doing away with that fence and pushing the Ports of Entry back from the river would be significant challenges.

Luis Benavente, senior patrol agent and public information officer for the Border Patrol's El Paso Sector, said public safety would be a concern, but finding the right balance of police and Border Patrol presence would be a challenge. The Border Patrol expressed concern about the inconvenience they might cause to tourists. If agents are patrolling the area, tourists might feel uncomfortable (Benavente). Detective Teresa Chavira, public information officer for the El Paso Police Department, said there is no connection between high crime rates and immigration in El Paso.

The staffing and control of the Ports of Entry was a concern of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, but it expressed no major reservations about El Rio Libre (Garcia). U.S. Customs had the same concerns. Roger Maier, public affairs officer for U.S. Customs, said that his agency would have to ensure that the border "maintains its integrity" and is secured. Maier considered the key elements for a safe

and successful El Rio Libre as plenty of control and staffing. People are always looking for ways to smuggle drugs through the border, so enough security might prevent people from attempting to look for easy access through El Rio Libre (Maier).

Rules And Regulations

The International Boundary and Water Commission is required by the 1970 Boundary Treaty to work with the Comision Internacional de Limites y Aguas (CILA) when approving any projects on the Rio Grande. This is to assure that the proposed project will not cause any conflicts with operations (El Paso, Summary Report).

The Boundary Commission is responsible for the construction, operation, and maintenance of all projects under its jurisdiction and for the management of federal law that deals with the proposed project. Proposals for projects that are to be constructed on Boundary Commission property need to be approved by the Commissioner for the U.S. section before such work is begun (International Boundary and Water Commission). The authorization for construction is granted in the form of a revocable license or permit. When it comes to building on a levee, there are regulations and steps that need to be followed. Before any planning or maps are made, the Boundary Commission advises project developers to consult with its officials.

In order to receive a permit and license from the Boundary Commission, three letters of application are needed that include information about the applicant, the nature of the request, types of structures to be constructed, and the type of venture it is. Maps, drawings and other details are also required. If excavation or dredging is required, then the applicant needs to contact the following agencies and obtain letters of approval and documentation:

- ❑ Historic Preservation for surveys of the area
- ❑ U.S. Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service for a determination of the impact of the proposed project on animal and plant life, and
- ❑ U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for a determination of the effects of the project on wetlands or streams

If land is privately owned, then the applicant needs to furnish the Boundary Commission with a letter of permission from the owner for the proposed construction. A permit from the State Water Commission, to divert waters from rivers or reservoirs, is needed before a permit for pumps and water can be issued. A Commercial License costs \$150 per year plus \$28 per year per acre. A Permanent Commercial Utilities License costs \$115 per year (International Boundary and Water Commission).

These are just the regulations on the U.S. side. The development on the Juarez side would go through a separate process.

Conclusion

Manuel Enrique Amparan Valtierra, assistant manager of SMART Supermarket in Juarez, was optimistic about the potential of El Rio Libre. As a businessman, he thought the benefits of increased tourism could be significant.

Arcelia Juarez, a Juarez resident, said the positive outcomes and possibilities are endless. She said teamwork between both cities is the key to success. Mrs. Juarez also believed that this would be a great reunion destination for families on both sides of the border. "There is nothing like this anywhere," Juarez said. She said this idea has the potential to give the border the opportunity to be known for something else than a place of problems.

Fernando Campos, a resident of the Chihuahuita neighborhood in Downtown El Paso, liked the concept of El Rio Libre. He said a change of scenery is what the border needs.

El Rio Libre has merit and deserves the attention of both Juarez and El Paso. The river has been us long enough. El Rio Libre would be difficult to implement, but not impossible. There are existing projects to guide El Rio Libre. With cooperation from city officials, business owners, residents, and all levels of government, the obstacles that stand in the way can be overcome. There are many challenges. However, with a vision and a plan, these challenges can be overcome.

The sister cities now divided by a tangible barrier need to carve out a place to celebrate what we have in common and how we are different. "The river instead of separating [the two cities], rescued them from the desert and bound them..." (Laird). El Rio Libre could put the "unity" back in community.

Recommendations

For the El Paso/Juarez community to develop El Rio Libre, much coordination and planning is needed.

The implementation of this idea is a complex. Dealing with the governments of two countries likely will be tedious and lengthy. Just to move the Ports of Entries back requires the approval of two Secretaries of the Treasury, a lengthy process that can result in a rejection at every stage (Maier). Getting the approval of the U.S. government is the greater challenge of the two (Valencia).

1. Form a task force

Community Scholars suggests that El Paso and Juarez create an El Rio Libre task force, similar to the Paseo Del Rio Association of San Antonio. This task force should consist of members of the private and public sectors of El Paso and Juarez, government enforcement agencies, planners, and other interested parties. In addition

to the issues outlined previously, the task force should address funding, security, taxes and duties in businesses and sales. A task force of visionaries would increase the chances that this project would succeed.

2. Identify possible funding sources

The task force could start by identifying private and government sources of funds to initiate and sustain the project. On the El Paso side, El Rio Libre falls within the boundaries of the Empowerment Zone, so there might be funds available to explore the viability of this idea.

3. Form committees to investigate key issues

A concern expressed during interviews for this report was public safety. Following the model of San Antonio's River Walk, committees should be formed to study all concerns and develop solutions to be incorporated into the plan. In San Antonio, the solution to public safety was the development of the Park Ranger Patrol. Public safety in El Rio Libre would have to be a joint operation of El Paso and Juarez, which raises issues not experienced by San Antonio River Walk planners.

4. Ensure that nearby homeowners are heard

El Rio Libre should be a good neighbor. Hours of operation, availability of alcohol, and noise should be addressed with care.

5. Make El Rio Libre truly a joint venture

This project should be a coordinated effort. It should not be viewed as one city having more input than the other. The development should reflect both cities and be a point of pride.

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About the Program

Community Scholars is a youth leadership development program based in El Paso, Texas. The paid summer internship provides public policy and economic development research opportunities for high school and college students. They share their findings with the public through oral presentations and written reports, which are posted periodically on the Internet.

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