

Colorado River Citizens Forum
El Centro, CA
September 28, 2016
*** Tentative Meeting Notes**

Board Members in attendance:

John Hernandez, Executive Director of Our Roots Multi-Cultural Center, Brawley, CA
Gary Knight, Yuma City Councilmember
Brian McNeece, Retired College Professor and Administrator, El Centro, CA
Juan Leal-Rubio, Yuma, Arizona
Alex Steenstra, Chair of the Department of Business and Administration and Northern Arizona University
Yuma Branch Campus
Roberta (Bobbi) Stevenson-McDermott, Yuma Natural Resource Conservation District Member, Arizona
Association of Conservation Districts Board Member
Tanya Trujillo, Colorado River Board
Jim Buster, environmental volunteer

Alternate:

Jay Simonton, Director of Utilities, City of Yuma, Arizona

USIBWC Staff in attendance:

Anna Morales, Yuma Area Operations Manager

Members of the public in attendance:

Fatima Luna, Sonoran Institute
John Heaz, Citizens
Rogelio Ayala, Mexican Farmer
Ramon Ayala, Mexican Farmer
Will Roller, Imperial Valley Press
Rigoberto Campos, Presidente, Comite Municipal Mexicali
Darrin Simon, San Diego County Water Authority
Andy Hurig, Country of Imperial
Carol Hann, Citizen
Glena Freeman, CRCF
Jose L. Angel, Regional Water Quality Control Board, Region 7
Tina Shields Imperial Irrigation District
Mike Pacheco, Imperial Irrigation District Citizen
Jose Kadry, Imperial Irrigation District
Alfredo de la Cerda, Mexican Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission, Mexicali
Tomas Oliva, Office of Rep. Juan Vargas, U.S. House of Representatives
Diana Rosales C., Mexican Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission, Mexicali
Matt Dessert, Imperial Irrigation District

Welcoming and Introduction Remarks:

At 4:06PM Citizens Forum Co-Chair Roberta (Bobbi) Stevenson-McDermott convened the meeting by welcoming the group and provided a brief description of the meeting agenda items. Board members and audience attendees were asked to introduce themselves.

The meeting was then turned over to the first presenter Fatima Luna.

Presentation One: An Integrated Approach for Addressing Solid Waste Pollution Sources in the New River, Calexico-Mexicali Region– Fatima Luna, Sonoran Institute

Ms. Luna stated that Phase 1 from 2014-2015 of the effort to address solid waste in the New River is being replicated in year 2. Replicable Sanitation Model involves the community members, the external moderator and government agencies. The objective is to remove solid waste. The Replicable Sanitation Model is based on government structure with twenty government agencies from Mexicali.

Crossing a site covered with trash is a reality for hundreds of people that live in Mexicali, including school children. In 2014 we launched our first urban project, which has a main goal of cleaning an area for 1.5 km along the drain. There are approximately 40,000 people living next to the drains, which have a great deal of solid waste and tires. The main objective is to remove solid waste in the area and improve the water quality. There was a clean-up event on September 20, 2016 and it has already removed 1 thousand cubic meters of solid waste. There was another cleanup event today at the Mexicali drain, September 28, 2016, that is not included in the numbers. These numbers do not include the over 500 tires removed and properly disposed.

Goal 1 was to remove 6,000 cubic meters of solid waste

Goal 2 is to continue to implement a communication campaign, which is “Mexicali Fluye”, developed in the first phase in Mexicali. Ultimately goal is to reach 100,000 residents.

Goal 3 is to implement an environmental education program where we can directly reach out to 10,000 people living around the drains. We have community members that are creating a neighborhood watch committee where people are learning the correct procedures on how to report people throwing trash. There is also a restoration committee and beautification committee. There is also work with the schools, training them on recycling and the benefits of having clean habitats. Goal 4 is a needs assessment and action plan for the New River in the City of Calexico, focusing on solid waste. Who is responsible for the dumping how often is it cleaned up?

Ms. Luna acknowledged all of the partners, stating this project has been a collaboration between many government agencies, NGO’s and the community members. This project has a great deal of positive potential. The collaboration between many partners will reduce health risk, solid waste and diseases.

The presentation ended with Q&A.

Question – Maintaining these sites after they have been cleaned up, have you talked with the municipalities about signage?

Answer – Yes, we are working with government agencies that have the resources and to be able to provide a collection zone where the trash was not being collected. There will be sustainable solutions; the communities are beginning to take pride in their community and policing their community. It is a long process working with community members.

Question – Are there disposal sites available where this solid waste can be taken?

Answer – At the beginning of the project we interviewed community members. We wanted to know why people were throwing trash in the drain. The trash service was going through the communities very early in the morning. People did not want to leave their trash outside because of the dogs so they would put it along the side of the drain. The second issue is that people and those hauling construction waste would bring their trash in trucks and dump it in the river. After many years, people feel that this is the norm. Some of the sites are far from their home.

Question – Would landfills be less expensive than what they are currently doing?

Answer – Ms. Luna agreed, there was no consequence to trash dumping. They are also working with community members to follow up on a complaint, along with accountability on both sides.

Question – Is this the first time in Mexicali that they are working on this issue?

Answer – No, Sonoran Institute has been working in Mexicali for 29 years on restoration of the Colorado River Delta and on education. This is our first urban project. We had success in phase one and received funding for phase two.

Question – What was the grant for this project and how many years? What were the people paid?

Answer – First phase 1 funded by BECC through EPA \$100,000, second phase BECC again for \$100,000. CALEPA funded \$200,000 for a total of \$400,000. For clean ups in different phases we received in-kind support from government agencies. We contract companies with equipment and also use volunteers. We do not pay people to clean up; we learn their needs and bring in the resources to the community.

Question – Do you have solid waste facilities in the area?

Answer – Yes there are and not all are free of charge. You can take solid waste that is recyclable to private businesses and they will pay for it. There was a pilot project where we collected trash from San Luis and the international drain to see if it would be economically feasible to recycle. It was a lot of work and the economic benefit was very little.

Question – Is there going to be some kind of collaboration of the entities to stop or reduce this problem?

Answer – Yes, we are working on that. A long-term goal is to work with government agencies where there is a system in place.

Follow up question- Does Mexicali use the same processes as the US?

Answer – I do not have an answer, but I can talk with the Program Coordinator and get an answer for you. Provide contact information and I will submit it to you.

Presentation Two – New River Improvement Project Strategic Plan – Project Status – Jose Angel, Executive Officer, Regional Water Quality Control Board

Mr. Angel presented a Power Point Presentation. History of the project was provided. A bill, AB 1079, in the California legislature, required a Strategic Plan. The California-Mexico Border Relations Council released a Strategic Plan in 2011; the 2011 cost for operation and maintenance figures are much higher at this point. Recommendations are structural controls and non-structural controls to address the New River Project.

The focus is on the Calexico area, with structural controls:

- Trash Screen immediately downstream from the U.S.-Mexico border
- New River Conveyance System in Calexico from border to near Calexico wastewater treatment plant
- New River Disinfection Facility near Calexico wastewater treatment plant
- New River Aeration structures, various locations downstream from Calexico
- Constructed wetlands, 11 sites totaling 1523 acres, downstream from Seeley

You are looking at nearly \$200 million dollars that are 2011 figures. By now the cost is probably \$210 million dollars. It is very difficult to get funding for this project. In addition, operations and maintenance costs were estimated at \$35 million dollars. The projects were not going anywhere due to funding issues.

Last year Secretary Rodriguez for CALEPA recommended that the original technical advisory committee re-evaluate the original recommendations for the Calexico area. Strong desire from our administration to address this problem from this side of the border. We are counting on Mexico to bring it up to Mexican standards. There has been quite a bit of progress on the wastewater side. At the state level we recognize that we have different quality standards. We treat the New River as a river and Mexicali treats it like a drain.

The price tag itself has been an impediment to implement the original recommendations. There has been a significant change in the water flows of the New River. Currently, compared to 5 years ago, there is a 5-10% decrease, but looking at the last 10 years there has been almost a 50% decrease of wastewater from Mexico. A number of things have changed; primarily, we do not get twenty million gallons of wastewater that we used to get because Mexico built a wastewater treatment facility that is outside of the Salton Sea Watershed. There are also two power generating facilities in Mexicali that use a lot of water and there is less agricultural runoff from the Mexicali Valley. In the past we've gotten 150,000-acre feet of water per year from Mexico at the border.

We went back to the drawing board and the technical advisory committee recommended:

1. Trash Screen – necessary for the short and long term. We want to make sure that Mexicali has the necessary capacity to provide what the community needs so that they will not dump trash into the drains.
2. Conveyance System
3. Calexico Wastewater Treatment Plant Pump-back system
4. New River aeration structures
5. Constructed wetlands

The challenge is collection. Mexicali started as an irrigation district; they have a lot of drains that served an agricultural purpose but they no longer serve the purpose. It is a federal responsibility to provide maintenance of the drains.

We abandoned the disinfection facility in favor of additional wetlands downstream; they are a passive system, less intensive when it comes to operation and maintenance. There are some concerns; it is not a magic bullet but we were able to turn the project into something more manageable that includes about \$22 million for the infrastructure of just the Calexico area. They presented the recommendations to the California-Mexico Border Relations Council in January of this year. The council wanted to make sure that they had buy-in from the community and directed them to come back to the Imperial Valley and engage the community for feedback. There was overwhelming support from Calexico. The Council adopted the revised recommendations.

They are building a booster pump-back system. It takes treated water from the existing Calexico Waste Water Treatment Plant and pumps it back to the border so that the river channel would not be dry. This paves the way for the river parkway. With the revised cost, based on the revised recommendations, we were able to save approximately \$110 million.

The project is divided into two phases. Phase 1 is design for the infrastructure (trash screen, culvert, and pump back system) and getting the environmental documentation completed. Phase 2 is construction of the infrastructure. The bill for \$1.4 million passed in the legislature to get Phase 1 completed. Coordinating with other sister agencies is part of getting the design completed. They are going to begin

working on the memorandums and contracts to go forward hopefully starting in October. Phase 1 should take about 1 ½ years to complete. They are still trying to identify who can own and operate some of the components. The Border Patrol sees a lot of value if the trash screen can be designed so that it meets tactical objectives. For funding for construction, we are contemplating several options (i.e. financial assistance, Proposition 1 State Water Bond, federal partners, Border Relations Council and in-kind service partners). They hope to have the infrastructure in place in the next four years.

The presentation ended with Q&A.

Question -For the pump back system, does that water come through the constructed wetlands?

Answer – We have an existing wastewater facility for the City of Calexico. They treat the wastewater, disinfect it and it goes into the river. They want to take the water and pump it back to the border so that we do not have a dry river.

Question – What was the time frame for when the volume of the New River dropped?

Answer - They first noticed a rapid decline in 2002 when the two power generating facilities were built in Mexicali. They use compressed gas that took close to 10 million gallons of wastewater per day for cooling purposes. In 2007 we lost another 20 million gallons because the new wastewater treatment facility went online in Mexicali. During the Easter earthquake of 2010, there was significant damage in the Mexicali Valley affecting 150-160 thousand acres of land so that drainage water did not exist.

Question – Is there a chance that at some point in time that no water will be coming across? Is there some sort of agreement with Mexico that they keep water in the New River coming back?

Answer – No, there is no agreement on the quantity of water Mexico needs to send us. It is up to Mexico. Over the long term, we can expect a continued decline in the flow.

Question – The river parkway appears to have a potential to be a huge economic driver for Calexico and a model perhaps for Mexicali if they could see the economic benefits of creating a river parkway then they would have an incentive to possibly do the same thing on their side of the border as an economic driver and it would create revenue.

Answer – Actually, we are copying Mexico; it is already in Phase I funded by a grant.

Question – I would like more detail on the efforts you make to coordinate the work that the Sonoran Institute is doing in Mexico and the local district in the US.

Answer – CalEPA Secretary Rodriguez formed the Solid Waste Work Group which provides recommendations to the California Mexico Border Relations Council to fund the types of projects the Sonoran Institute has implemented. California Environmental Protection Agency (CalEPA) funded a substantial amount of phase 2 of the project. We coordinate and review proposals. There is a longstanding relationship.

Question - On the US side, is there coordination with the IID (Imperial Irrigation District)?

Answer – The IID is part of the technical advisory committee for the strategic plan. There is close coordination. To the IID's credit, they have been very supportive.

Question – With Port of Entry construction underway, has it caused any challenges with the design or cost?

Answer – It presents significant challenges; we met with the Border Patrol and US General Services Administration who is the technical arm/architect or engineer for the expansion of the new Port of Entry. The longer we wait with this project, the more difficult it will be in getting the trash screen and the piping done. They are abandoning the existing port and building a new one so that it has more capacity for incoming traffic into the US. Part of the infrastructure is parking lots and we do not want to get into tearing up parking lots.

Question – Would they want to have the New River underground?

Answer – The people from Homeland Security see value with the trash screen, they want to make sure that they continue to discharge their function of Homeland Security. Clearly when we update the health threat that the river poses to our citizens it also affects the Border Patrol Agents because this is where they work and some live in Calexico. They also recognize the value.

Question – Why wasn't a conveyance pipe under the port in the Mexican plans?

Answer - The Mexican side considered an underground pipe. Unfortunately, the way they designed it the cost was too expensive.

Comment – Co-wrote an article about the New River in 1993 with David Swenski for the San Diego Reader. At the time, the Commissioner stated he was prepared to go for a swim and they were going to clean up the New River soon. Congratulations on the project to pump water from the current wastewater treatment plant. It is about time that we do something with clean water instead of mixing it with polluted water. Best news he has heard on the New River.

Public Comments:

The President representing the National Campesinos asking for help that they permit them to use the water from the Colorado River that supplies water to Mexicali and Baja California. We are concerned about the management of the water and we have tried to join efforts of the management of the water. We have the knowledge and we can do the job on the Mexican side. Minute 319 makes arrangement for Mexico but it does not have part for their opinion of what they can do. In general, we can provide the help and ask for help.

Question - Does this pertain to irrigation water?

Answer - They are the ag producers of Mexicali Valley. They utilize 80% of the water that has gone over there and they are concerned about the expiration of Minute 319. The new Minute that is coming, Minute 32X, with the climate change and shortage of water, the producers are very concerned. They want to be part of the dialogue and have a seat at the table.

Board Discussion:

Stevenson-McDermott - Next scheduled meeting is January 25, 2017 in Yuma. We are taking suggestions for agenda items for that particular meeting. In January, California and Arizona are on different time zones.

Suggested Agenda Items:

- Bureau of Reclamation update on the Colorado River status.

- Arizona Department of Environmental Quality presentation on our clean drinking water initiative, which includes an audit of systems throughout the state, with special attention to schools.

Meeting was adjourned at 7:35PM

*Meeting notes are tentative and summarize in draft the contents and discussion of Citizens Forum Meetings. While these notes are intended to provide a general overview of Citizens Forum Meetings, they may not necessarily be accurate or complete, and may not be representative of USIBWC policy or positions.