

**Lower Rio Grande Citizens' Forum Meeting
Rio Grande Valley Partnership
Weslaco, TX
April 16, 2008
Tentative Meeting Notes***

Board Members in Attendance:

Carl Boyd
Joseph Coulter
Kika De La Garza
Laura De La Garza
Glenn Jarvis
William Lewis
Bradly Nibert
Phillip Waldron

Board Members Absent:

Mary Lou Campbell
Edward Vela
Jose L. Munoz

USIBWC Staff in Attendance:

Carlos Marin
Raymundo Aguirre
Al Riera
Enrique Reyes
Patrick Daize
Elida Villarreal

Mx IBWC Staff in Attendance:

Ing. Felipe Chalons
Alejandro Diaz Puente

Members of the Public in Attendance:

Godfrey Garza, HCDD #1
Wayne Halbert, Harlingen Irrigation
Eric Ellman, Los Caminos del Rio
Wayne Bartholomew, Frontera Audubon
Roxanne De La Garza, Hidalgo County's Judges Office
Robert Diaz de Leon, Alamo Economic Development Council
David Rodriguez, Progress Times

Carol J. Brown, Citizen
J. Trevino, Texas Department of Agriculture
Sonia Waaser, Citizen
Jones Auster, Citizen
Jackie Leatherman, The Monitor
Chris Sherman, Citizen
Betty Perez, Citizen
Susan Thompson, Citizen
John Wood, Cameron County Commission
Hugo Gonzalez, Dos Logistics
Denisha Thompson, Dos Logistics
Steve Taylor, Rio Grande Guardian
Darla Jones, City of La Feria
Lori Jones, Dannenbaum
Michelle Leftwich, City of Mercedes
Pancho Garcia, Brownsville Citizen

Welcome and Introductions:

Citizens' Forum Co-Chair Bill Lewis called the meeting to order. After introductions, he introduced IBWC Commissioner Carlos Marin.

Introduction of USIBWC Principal Engineer Al Riera and Lower Rio Grande Project Manager Patrick Daize

Carlos Marin began by thanking everybody for attending. He introduced Mr. Al Riera, as the new Principal Engineer for the Operations Department and stated that Mr. Riera had taken over the department a little over a year ago. He then announced that Project Manager Enrique "Rick" Reyes, would be retiring on June 27, 2008, and expressed appreciation for all he had done for the Commission. He introduced new Operations Manager Patrick Daize.

Citizens' Forum Co-Chair Bill Lewis then came back and introduced Dr. Raymundo Aguirre

Lower Rio Grande Flood Control Levee Improvement Project

Dr. Raymundo Aguirre began his presentation giving a brief description of the Levee Rehab project. He briefed the Forum on locations and distances and described the work that was planned in various segments between Peñitas and Brownsville. He then described reaches of levee, going into detail explaining the Memorandum of Understanding between the U.S. Section of the IBWC and Hidalgo County Drainage District #1 for levee work to be performed by the District as per Individual Work Order #1 for Phase I Mission levee, Banker to Inspiration Road, and Phase II Mission Levee, Inspiration Road to Peñitas, and Individual Work Order #2 for the Common Levee and Anzalduas Dike.

Forum Co-Chair Bill Lewis questioned whether the levee-raising had been considered with regard to the 2 bridges being constructed and Dr. Aguirre responded that this was taken into consideration.

Question: Has IBWC tested materials of levee in place?

Answer: Yes, materials have been tested and we found no problem with levee material but with foundation in some isolated cases.

Question: Will levees have 3 feet of freeboard?

Answer: Yes.

Question: Will levees be certified to meet FEMA requirements?

Answer: Yes, we will be submitting necessary information to FEMA.

Question: How much has been assigned to Cameron County?

Answer: \$1.5 million

Activities of Los Caminos del Rio

Forum Co-Chair Bill Lewis introduced Eric Ellman, Executive Director for Los Caminos del Rio (an organization that does economic development using heritage tourism).

Mr. Ellman discussed how wildlife, outdoor activities and the levee could work together for a better quality of life. He then followed that topic by addressing health issues, diabetes, etc. He stated that the IBWC had a role in helping to address some of these issues/concerns. He continued to state that Los Caminos del Rio addressed it by fishing and trying to attract more people into embracing that sport. He discussed flat water paddling and possibly looking at developing a water sport/paddling area just downstream of Anzalduas Dam. He stated that their organization had recently received a permit from IBWC to lead biking tours through a biking area around the Old Hidalgo Pump. He then addressed the funding needed for these projects. He continued to state that they encouraged using irrigation canals and levees for these different activities.

Public Comment

After both presentations, IBWC Commissioner Carlos Marin, was asked several questions about the combined levee-border wall being constructed by Hidalgo County Drainage District #1 in coordination with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. He responded by briefing on the plans and the issues, and advised the Forum that USIBWC is working with the Department of Homeland Security to resolve the issues.

The public was then asked if they had any questions or concerns.

Committee member Carl Boyd stated that IBWC was shorthanded during Hurricane Beulah in 1967 and wanted to know what the agency was going to do now that it had fewer employees.

The response was that there were local contractors that could assist; and possibly the hiring of contractors.

Question: Why do we allow farming in the floodway but no trees?

Answer: Woody growth is not allowed in the floodway as it is generally not compatible with flood control.

A discussion followed on what effects vegetation had on flows.

Question: If we have until 2009 to meet FEMA, requirements, why are we concerned about the end of this fiscal year?

Answer: It is because of the funding issue.

Question: For Hidalgo Phase I and II, what issues are pending in order to initiate construction?

Answer: Phase I, none. Phase II needs permits from the Corps of Engineers, etc. and resolution of other contracting issues.

Question: What about NEPA (environmental law) compliance?

Answer: A lot of issues remain to be addressed regarding the proposed combined levee-border wall.

Question: How is IBWC addressing those issues?

Answered by Carlos Marin: We're reviewing how IBWC is affected by the environmental waivers for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security border fence.

Question: What time frame is anticipated for work to start?

Answered by Godfrey Garza: The situation is, if all agreements are signed by the County and Department of Homeland Security in the next several weeks, we will have bid documents out by May 10th and all subsequent documents by the middle of June.

Question by DeLeon: Is the floodway also being looked at?

Answer: (Raymundo Aguirre) Yes

Question: Does watershed in Mexico affect design?

Answer: Yes, Mexico's tributaries have large effect on design. Each country may improve its own levee.

Toward the end of public comment Los Fresnos resident Francisco Garcia took the opportunity to criticize the Department of Homeland Security, Cameron County leaders, and Hidalgo County for “buckling” under pressure to build the border wall. Mr. Garcia also expressed his view that Dannenbaum Engineering (which is performing work for Hidalgo County) was not taking environmental and wildlife issues into consideration.

Forum Co-Chair Lewis then praised Project Manager and Forum Co-Chair Rick Reyes for his many years of service with the International Boundary and Water Commission, Lower Rio Grande Flood Control Project. He then advised the Forum that Mr. Reyes was retiring in June, after 23 years of service.

Mr. Bill Lewis then concluded the meeting and requested suggestions for the next meeting tentatively scheduled for July 16, 2008 at the Mercedes Office.

Suggested topics were:

- Smart growth/preservation
- Flood Control – How it can all work together.
- Update on levee rehab
- Request to invite John Jacob

With no further questions or comments, the meeting was adjourned.

*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.