

Rio Grande Citizens' Forum
USIBWC Headquarters
El Paso, TX
February 4, 2008

*Tentative Meeting Notes

Co-chair Alisa Jorgensen made welcoming remarks and reviewed the agenda items. She asked the board members and audience to introduce themselves.

Board Members in Attendance:

Zay Clopton, New Mexico rancher
Doug Echlin, Coronado Neighborhood Association
Ed Fierro, El Paso Water Utilities
Joe Groff, Chihuahuan Desert Wildlife Rescue
John Hernandez, Elephant Butte Irrigation District, consulting engineer
Alisa Jorgensen, Upper Valley Neighborhood Association
Terry McMillan, Texas Commission on Environmental Quality

USIBWC Staff in Attendance:

Gabriel Duran
Hayley Goodstein
Jose Nuñez
Al Riera
Tony Solo
Sally Spener

MxIBWC Staff in Attendance:

Gilberto Elizalde
Enrique Muñoz

Members of the Public in Attendance:

Alan Shubert, City of El Paso
Greg Bloom, Office of Senator Bingaman
Woody Irving, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
Mike Landis, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
Jose Reyes, Parkhill, Smith & Cooper
David Dodge, Malcolm Pirnie
Inga Groff, League of Women Voters of El Paso
Sam Irrinki, CH2MHILL
Maria Sisneros, EPA
Scott Winton, Winton Group
Ari Michelsen, Texas A & M AgriLife Research
Rogelio Garcia, U.S. Border Patrol
Jorge Salas, U.S. Border Patrol
Ed Hiraes, U.S. Border Patrol

Lou Irwin, candidate for Texas House of Representatives
Philip Partridge, Thunderbird Digital, Rio Grande recreational enthusiast
Jack McGrath, McGrath Real Estate
Bill Hagan, Rocky Mountain Mortgage Company
Mary Frances Keisling, Save the Valley Neighborhood/Civic Association

Storm 2006 Capital Project Update

Alan Shubert, City Engineer, City of El Paso, gave a presentation on this topic. After Storm 2006, the City programmed over \$100 million in certificates of obligation to repair, prevent, and improve drainage as well as to start the planning process to create a good way to manage floodplain administration.

There were 50 repair projects executed by the Street Department just to clean things up. We have 10 major reconstruction projects complete, 12 in construction, 5 in design, and 13 projects transferred to the new stormwater utility.

He then discussed the status of various projects, including:

- Baltimore/Glory Road Storm Sewer Re-route – A large corrugated pipe collapsed and couldn't move stormwater. Project has been substantially completed.
- Thunderbird Diversion Channel - Project has been substantially completed.
- Mesa Hills and Wallenberg - Project has been substantially completed.
- Modesto Channel River Outfall along Border Highway - It was substantially completed in December.
- James Watt & Lee Trevino Street & Drainage Improvements - It has been substantially completed.
- Franklin Summit Project - It has been completed.
- Thornton Street Project - It has been completed.
- High Ridge and Bear Ridge - It was substantially completed.
- Castellano Drive - It has several phases but the first part has been completed. We have a lot to do along Castellano, much of which will be turned over to the stormwater utility.

He presented a table of projects showing project, status, construction start date, completion target, and budget. He provided handouts with the information. He highlighted several projects, including:

- Shadow Mountain - Should be done by summer but there are difficult utility issues that are being resolved. The second phase will be done in fall of this year.
- Upper Valley Drainage Improvements - Phase I McCutcheon and Redd Road is about to have contract approved.
- Ojo de Agua - Under construction and going well.
- Gravity Flow Outlets to Rio Grande – We are doing this project in conjunction with USIBWC so the levees can be certified to FEMA; we need to certify the outlets. We are aiming for March 2008 for completion. We have to fabricate some of those outlets.

Some jobs are later than we hoped. Engineering is more difficult than expected in some cases due to complications related to utilities and natural drainage. For example, for Montoya Drain there are issues to be worked out with the irrigation district and the New Mexico Department of Transportation. For Colonia Escondida, the streets are in Texas and the drainage in New Mexico. We are working on it now. McKelligon Canyon

Road and drainage improvement will not affect Viva El Paso. The Chihuahuita Neighborhood project is in design.

51 projects closed to date. 6 additional projects are ready to be closed. These mainly consist of smaller repair projects. We have received slightly less than \$2 million from FEMA. For federal reimbursement, there is an 18 month deadline to get projects completed from the time of a presidential declaration. We are at 17 months and expect to get extensions for some projects. If we get \$10 million from FEMA for this effort, we will consider it to be successful.

Funding has also been received from the Hazard and Mitigation Grant Program. Municipalities can apply for that funding from the state. We received \$850,000 but we hope for another \$280,000. It helps us buy houses and get them out of the floodplain. There are about 100 properties in the Saipan and Mowad areas that we are purchasing to get out of the floodplain.

Other items are being transferred to the new stormwater utility, which is being run by the PSB. They created it in accordance with Texas statute. It allows them to make capital improvements to fix the sins of the past with how drainage has been done in the City. He presented a list of projects transferred to the stormwater utility. Another effort is the Master Drainage Study and Plan. We hired URS, a firm that partners with FEMA, to put together a master drainage study.

There are some items that require coordination with other entities such as Ft. Bliss, IBWC, Corps of Engineers, etc.

The stormwater utility starts operation in March of this year. After creation of the stormwater utility, the PSB will run the projects since they have more experience with pumps and similar systems.

John Hernandez asked about the funding source. Shubert replied that the City approved the issuance of certificates of obligation. They reprogrammed some money. About \$100 million came out of additional issuance of certificates of obligation they approved in fall 2006. They sell bonds to pay for it but it's approved by the City Council rather than voters. These certificates are commonly done in Texas for public safety issues. It is debt that we will have to sell bonds to pay off.

Terry McMillan asked whether the City is trying to buy out the properties in the neighborhood south of the Spaghetti Bowl due to repeated flooding. Shubert stated that the City is doing so.

A member of the public asked about the Ocotillo Project schedule, planned to start March 2008 and be completed in July 2008. Shubert indicated that the project appears to be on track with that schedule but it is not guaranteed.

Ed Fierro asked about who designed the projects. Shubert noted that almost 100% of design work is done by outside consultants. However, the City is interested in building up an in-house design staff.

There was discussion about the hydrologic and meteorological information from Storm 2006 and whether it was a 100-year storm/flood, and how climate change may affect the definition of a 100-year event. There was concern about the lack of rain gages, stream gages, and pump gages. The City is working to improve this to be able to get better information during future storms.

A member of the public asked about the accuracy of topographical maps used for stormwater improvement projects. Shubert noted that there is some old information or

datasets with various discrepancies. The City is now developing good topographic data through the GIS system.

Rio Grande Flood Control Improvement Projects in Ciudad Juarez

Principal Engineer Gilberto Elizalde of the Mexican Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission gave this presentation.

In 2006 and 2007, we did projects to repair the gates on the Mexican levee between American and International Dams, a 2-mile reach. Vegetation clearing and clean-up of the Mexican berm was also done in the same reach.

At the end of 2006, we removed sediment in the Rio Grande for 1.2 miles. With the rains in 2006, the channel was filled with sediment. We did emergency works to clear the channel to allow the river to flow.

Likewise, with the U.S. Section, a Joint Report of the Principal Engineers was developed with recommendations for works to restore the river. In this way, we distribute the works from American Dam to the Juarez Valley between the two countries. He presented a diagram showing the distribution.

In 2007, jointly with the U.S. Section, we did sediment control works using U.S. funds. 163,000 cubic yards were removed in a 2.6-mile reach of the concrete-lined channel. This was done with U.S. funds and the sediment was deposited in Mexican territory. Last year, through the IBWC, works were done to define the capacity of the river. Topographical studies were done to determine the hydraulic capacity, the volume of silt to remove, and the slope of the Mexican levee so it could be reinforced. Last year, through Conagua, there were sediment removal works in the river for 7.5 miles upstream from the Alamo Grade Control Structure; 400,000 cubic meters were removed.

He showed photos of sediment removal activities and of the clearing of the Mexican berm between American and International Dams.

He then discussed works planned for 2008. These include: removal of sediment from the pilot channel, cleaning of the berm and strengthening of the Mexican levee in the reaches from American to International Dams and the Cordova International – Bridge of the Americas to Riverside Dam. The Commission is also looking at options for the total rehabilitation of the channel between American and International Dams. Another project is reinforcement of the levee from the Alamo Grade Control structure to the Island Grade Control Structure for 20.5 miles.

A plan is also being worked on for activities through 2010.

Sam Irrinki asked about damage on the Juarez side from the 2006 flooding. Elizalde responded that the Rio Grande flow did not cause problems. The water did not overtop the levees. It was effects in the city due to rains in the mountains that ran through the city to the river.

Gabriel Duran requested an update on La Montada Dam. Elizalde stated that Conagua recommended to open it up to allow water to flow into the arroyo because the dike was at risk of failure if there were additional flows. So they cut an opening to allow the waters to flow freely. Conagua is doing studies to establish a program for a permanent solution.

Planned Levee Improvements in El Paso and Doña Ana Counties

Gabriel Duran, Engineer, USIBWC, gave a presentation on this topic. He briefly described the USIBWC Canalization Project, which covers 106 river miles in Southern New Mexico and West Texas. He showed a slide of levee terminology and possible means of failure. Freeboard is our insurance factor for the levees. Gopher holes are another concern. A gopher in Nevada was responsible for a recent levee failure there. The levees' structural integrity is sound. The levees have been in place for years and there have been occasional floods that test the levees, such as in 2006.

We are going to do some improvements in the Hatch/Rincon/Tonuco Bridge area, the Mesilla Valley, and Vado to American Dam. He showed a map of levee deficiencies in the Hatch/Tonuco Bridge area. We are making improvements to respond to new FEMA regulations. For the Mesilla Valley, he showed a map where 1-2 feet of levee enhancement is needed.

He showed a map of the Canutillo Upper Valley Segment. USIBWC had relied on the railroad embankment instead of a levee on the east side of the river. We are going to do something in this area to provide better flood protection.

He mentioned FEMA requirements; we need enhancement to meet the 3 feet of freeboard to protect against the 100-year flood event.

Mike Landis stated that there has not been a clear determination by FEMA of whether the 2006 storm was a 75 or 100 or other frequency event.

Duran responded that FEMA said to protect for a 100-year event. That's what USIBWC is working to do. USIBWC is doing its best to determine what a 100-year flood is. There is engineering judgment involved. But the direction is to protect for a 100-year flood with 3-foot freeboard. A 100-year storm is of such intensity that it would only likely occur once in 100 years.

John Hernandez stated that there were high-intensity rains in the mountains, causing damage that wasn't due to rain affecting the river. In his view, flow in the Rio Grande in 2006 was nowhere near the 100-year storm.

A member of the public asked about the schedule for completing levee improvements. Duran responded that the USIBWC has received some funds to work in New Mexico. He then continued with the presentation.

If the levees are not certified, then FEMA will map the flood zones as if the levees did not exist at all.

Alan Shubert, City of El Paso, stated that the protest period started December 20 for those who object to FEMA's draft flood maps. Duran stated that USIBWC is using advanced modeling. USIBWC believes FEMA's model overestimates flood risk. He reiterated that the levees did hold during the 2006 storm.

USIBWC has been allocated \$11.7 million to repair the levees. We are going to start with New Mexico. We will start improving levees in the Rincon and Mesilla Valleys down to the Texas boundary line.

He was asked whether sediment will be used to construct the levee improvements. The USIBWC does not want to use sandy material, like silt, for the improvements. The agency plans to use good solid material. When USIBWC built the levees in the 1930s, they were built with local materials – sand mixed with clay. USIBWC wants to conduct geotechnical studies to get more information. We had some LIDAR studies done by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers using ground-penetrating radar, which suggested that material in the levees where there are old ox bows from the old river channel could

potentially be weak; we are going to follow up with geotechnical studies to minimize risk.

Levee enhancement work is expected to start with Selden Canyon and proceed downstream to Mesilla Dam. USIBWC can do most of that work with in-house forces but may need to contract out in areas that require more than 2 feet of height enhancement.

In Canutillo, USIBWC is going to start coordinating with the county and railroad authorities. He showed a slide of Canutillo. Where the USIBWC doesn't have right-of-way, a floodwall will need to be added.

In the area upstream of American Dam, the USIBWC plans to enhance levees, erect a floodwall, and build a new levee, to protect this part. This area received flooding in 2006. We also have to improve the drains to prevent overflows from the Rio Grande. USIBWC completed some levee-raising work between the old Riverside Dam and upstream about 12 miles to International Dam. USIBWC used high-density fill material. As Mr. Shubert stated, we are in the process of sealing up old penetrations to our wasteway. We have a contract with El Paso County Water Improvement District # 1 to seal it up to provide protection. The City of El Paso is improving the gates that come into the Chamizal Project. It's part of our certification process. We did submit to FEMA our draft agreement to have our levees certified by March 2008 so we are going to be on the path to do that by end of March for the area from International Dam to Riverside Dam. But there is a lot of other work that needs to be done upstream to Percha Dam, New Mexico.

The agency has prepared an Environmental Impact Statement for the Canalization Project. Issuance of a Record of Decision is pending the outcome of the collaborative process with stakeholders. The environmental enhancements and other work is subject to the availability of federal appropriations.

In response to questions, Duran stated that the FLO-2D modeling has been done in-house but the geotechnical studies will be contracted out.

Doug Echlin stated that a slide from the presentation indicated about 38 miles of deficient levees in Doña Ana County. In the more rural areas, is there consideration of purchasing flood easements where agriculture would benefit from a periodic flood? Duran replied that the USIBWC does not plan to let any levees go; levees will be maintained in that reach.

Doug Echlin stated that he is glad that the Record of Decision is pending. Duran stated that the agency's environmental staff has indicated that it is close to being signed.

Al Riera added that the Commission is going to go ahead and upgrade the levees. If purchasing flood easements is an environmental option the agency wants to pursue in the future, that would be studied as a separate environmental action. USIBWC has not talked with the farmers to see if they would be interested in this option.

Ed Fierro asked whether \$11.7 million is enough funding. Duran stated that the agency does not yet have a final cost estimate but USIBWC will use up all that money.

Mary Frances Keisling commented about the FEMA flood mapping. FEMA said that as soon as the levees were raised then all of the area in the Upper Valley would be taken out of the floodplain. The topo maps are not necessarily accurate, and it doesn't make much sense. Most of the people were not flooded by the river. We need to find out what to do about flood insurance.

Duran noted that questions have been raised about the accuracy of the FEMA maps but they do establish zones where floods might be so it's USIBWC's responsibility to improve levees.

A member of the public stated that they were told that they would be out of the floodplain once USIBWC certifies the levees.

USIBWC Engineering Services Division Chief Jose Nuñez stated that USIBWC is working to obtain certification from International Dam to Riverside Dam. Geotechnical studies must be completed before levee-raising will be done in the Upper Valley. Members of the public are interested to know when work will be completed and the levees certified in the Upper Valley. USIBWC promised to work diligently but there is not a timeline to complete work in this area, which is subject to the availability of funding.

There was additional discussion about modeling. The effect of agricultural drains on the river is taken into account in the modeling. There is current LIDAR available for levees in the area. There is interest in sharing relevant data among various government agencies.

USIBWC Annual Reports

USIBWC Public Affairs Officer Sally Spener gave a presentation on this topic. Annual Reports are prepared by the International Boundary and Water Commission, United States and Mexico, in accordance with a provision of the 1944 Water Treaty. They are submitted to the U.S. State Department and Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Relations. They are also available on the USIBWC web page. The reports cover Demarcation of the International Boundary, Rio Grande, Colorado River, Sanitation and Water Quality, and Other Projects (primarily bridges and border crossings). The reports include photos and a map indicating where projects are located along the international boundary. The 2005 and 2006 reports are well into production and should be coming out soon while the 2007 report should be out later in the year.

Public Comment

A member of the public asked whether the presentations from the meeting are available electronically. Staff responded that the presentations will be available on the USIBWC web page in the near future.

A member of the public expressed concern that the agency does not manage its projects for recreational opportunities. He expressed concern that the levees are blocked with gates and No Trespassing signs. He noted that the river trail bike path near Country Club Road is difficult to access since it does not extend all the way to Country Club Road. He suggested that a portion of the levees be opened for public access. He also suggested that water be diverted to create a lake for recreational use.

Another member of the public noted that prior to the gates being placed to control access, there was motorized traffic at all hours of the night. In his view, access should be prohibited.

Al Riera pointed out that the levees' primary purpose is flood control and the USIBWC needs to ensure the integrity of the levees. The levees are not for ATVs but the Commission is not going to stop anyone from walking on the levees. There are liability concerns about driving on the levees. If some other entity wants to develop recreational

opportunities, the USIBWC will work with that entity but it's not the agency's mission to provide recreational facilities.

Spener mentioned that the USIBWC has entered into partnerships with various entities for park and recreational facilities, including the river park in the Upper Valley, a park in the City of Sunland Park, a golf course, Texas and New Mexico State Parks, and the National Park Service, among others. If an entity has a proposal for a recreational project, the USIBWC will work with that entity.

Alisa Jorgensen stated that the City is looking at dual usage of floodplains. She offered to provide contact information and discuss this with the member of the public following the meeting.

Board Discussion

Community Co-chair Alisa Jorgensen stated that it has been her pleasure to serve as Co-chair for the last year. Fellow board member Conrad Keyes will assume the Co-chair responsibilities starting with the next meeting on June 4 in Las Cruces.

Suggested Future Agenda Items

John Hernandez mentioned proposed dairy issues he would like to bring to the attention of IBWC. There had been some concern about water quality impacts related to a proposed permit for dairy operations in New Mexico.

Alisa Jorgensen suggested a presentation by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation about Rio Grande Project forecasts.

A member of the public suggested an update on the levee work for Doña Ana and El Paso Counties.

It was requested that additional suggestions be sent via e-mail to Sally Spener.

*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.