



For Immediate Release
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Bernalillo County Commission to Rehear Appeal of Zone Map Amendment for Santolina Development Project

Albuquerque, NM – An appeal of the controversial Santolina Development Project will be heard a second time in front of the Bernalillo County Commission this week.

The hearing is scheduled for **Wednesday, August 25, 2021 at 3pm.**
Detailed information on how to view the hearing and the agenda at the end of this release.

The first appeal of the Bernalillo County Planning Commission’s recommendation to change the zoning from Agricultural to Planned Communities was back in 2014. Two courts—the District Court and the Court of Appeals—ruled that the Bernalillo County Commission’s approval of the zone map amendment was invalid due to bias shown by one of the commissioners. Former commissioner Art De La Cruz had published an OpEd in the *Albuquerque Journal* in favor of the Santolina Development Project prior to the hearing. The hearing is a quasi-judicial forum in which commissioners should remain neutral until they hear all the evidence.

County staff has announced that no public comment will be permitted at this hearing. The public notice stated that the Bernalillo County Commission Rules of Procedure for Appeals will be followed. “If new evidence is submitted, it is possible that the case could be remanded to the CPC [County Planning Commission] for consideration if new evidence is presented to the Board that was not presented to the CPC,” County officials stated.

The New Mexico Environmental Law Center is representing SouthWest Organizing Project, Pajarito Village Neighborhood Association plus a number of community members as individuals in this case.

New Evidence

NMELC has filed two motions on behalf of their clients which will be addressed at the August 25th hearing: 1) to present additional evidence since the last hearing which was held more than six years ago and 2) to request that the hearing be postponed until September, in order to hear from an expert who is not available in August.

The new evidence includes information confirming that there is not adequate water for the proposed Santolina development. This information will be shared by Norman Gaume, a retired licensed professional engineer in New Mexico who is an expert on Albuquerque area water and the Rio Grande. He will testify that the lack of a viable water supply is more apparent now than in 2015 when the appeal was first heard.

Additional new evidence includes rates of population growth and job creation in the Albuquerque area that has been developed since 2015; the estimates projected six years ago were unrealistic. We have requested a delay so that this information may be provided by Kelly O'Donnell, a research professor in Public Administration at the University of New Mexico and formerly a Deputy Cabinet Secretary of the New Mexico Economic Development Department.

Also, new evidence indicates that the Santolina developers (Western Albuquerque Land Holdings or WALH) have failed to move forward in accordance with their approved Level A and Level B Community Master Plans. WALH has not applied for the water that is necessary for the proposed development, and they have applied for two Special Use Permits. There are questions that WALH may not actually intend to proceed with the development.

New Mexico's drought and warming climate have exacerbated water shortages in the state, and these trends will continue for the foreseeable future and get worse, making it clearer that there is not adequate water for the proposed Santolina development project.

The Bernalillo County Commission should hear this new evidence or remand the appeal back to the County Planning Commission so it can hear the new evidence.

Community Opposition

Community members have long opposed the controversial Santolina development project, which would create a mega-sprawl housing development for 95,000 people, in spite of recent reports projecting dramatically less population growth than previously forecast.

It is estimated that Santolina would demand over **10 million gallons of water per day**. Water remains a major concern especially in a region that continues to experience long-term drought coupled with climate change.

Other major concerns include:

- The increased **tax** burden (over \$654 million dollars for schools alone)
- Overcrowded **schools**
- Increased **traffic** on the West Side
- Unstable **sand** dunes that would blow onto farms and homes located in the valley
- This type of **sprawl** development is not aligned to new more sustainable housing trends

Local acequero and traditional farmer **Santiago Maestas** said, "This is our battle. This mega drought, I'm afraid, is more about climate change than just a drought. I think this may be the new

normal. Basically, sparse snow packs in the winter, quick run-off in the spring, and then dependence on the monsoon rains to get us through the growing season. And, in fact, that's our situation right now. Last year the snowpack was very poor. The run-off started early. The run-off ran out within the next couple of weeks, and then we've just been dependent on the monsoon for water. It's projected that the Rio Grande will run dry. We need to continue fighting back."

Traditional farmer **Marcia Fernandez** is concerned about how a development project like Santolina will impact her grandchildren. "We are in a world of hurt when it comes to irrigating our lands. ... Pumping millions of gallons of water up for a new development on the West Mesa will impact every single thing that grows down here on the floor of the valley. And I'm terrified that my grandchildren, who honor the land as much as we do, will have a lifetime that does not include this beautiful green belt that is in our valley."

Alejandría Lyons, Environmental Justice Organizer for the SouthWest Organizing Project, said, "The acequias belong to our community. And developments like these continue to take water out of the hands of community and into industry. It takes a community to take down such large developers, to take down international banks that are coming into our community and trying to steal our water resources and take them out of community. And we won't let it happen. When it comes to water we know that this is one of our most precious resources here in the desert and we will continue to protect our beloved acequias."

Dr. Virginia Necochea, Executive Director at the New Mexico Environmental Law Center and member of the Contra Santolina Working Group, said, "The community, through its organizing efforts and the support from the Law Center, has delayed this project for eight years now, and it shows just the powerful commitment. I just want to recognize the work of everyone who has been part of it over the years, because that is a victory in and of itself. Our water is sacred. We bear the responsibility of being good stewards of our precious and sacred Mother Earth and so we will continue to walk in that way. El Agua No Se Vende, El Agua Se Defiende. Water is not for sale, we will always rise to defend our precious water."

How to Watch the Hearing:

The hearing will be held over Zoom. No public comment is permitted during this part of the meeting.

The agenda can be accessed here:

<http://bernalillocountynm.iqm2.com/Citizens/FileOpen.aspx?Type=14&ID=2533&Inline=True>

Watch via Zoom: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84981755266> Webinar ID: 849 8175 5266, Dial in (669) 900-9128 // 84981755266#

Link to Contra Santolina Working Group Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/contrasantolina>

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