



For Immediate Release

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COMMUNITY CONTINUES OPPOSITION TO MASSIVE PIECEMEAL SANTOLINA DEVELOPMENT PROPOSED FOR ABQ'S WEST MESA

Bernalillo County Planning Commission to Hold Hearing on Santolina Development Project Level A and Level BII Master Plans

Albuquerque, NM--The Bernalillo County Planning Commission (CPC) is scheduled to hold a hearing on the Santolina Development Project proposed by Western Albuquerque Land Holdings (WALH) on **Wednesday, March 2nd beginning at 9am**. The hearing will be held over [zoom](#), and the agenda can be accessed [here](#). The deadline to sign up to speak during public comment is the day before the hearing.

The CPC will consider two items: the Amended Level A Master Plan and the Level B.II Master Plan for the Santolina development project that was introduced in late 2013. Santolina, if built, would be located on the West Side of Albuquerque. Community members, including the Contra Santolina Working Group, South Valley Regional Association of Acequias (SVRAA), Center for Social Sustainable Systems (CESOSS), and the SouthWest Organizing Project (SWOP), have been tenaciously fighting the Santolina project since 2013. The New Mexico Environmental Law Center represents various clients on this important case, including SWOP, SVRAA, CESOSS, and other individual clients.

The Contra Santolina Working Group analyzed both plans and came up with a long laundry list of problems. Late last year, the County Planning staff agreed with many aspects of the Working Group's analysis, based on the comments submitted to the CPC, which can be accessed at this [link](#). However, now the County Planning staff is recommending that the CPC approve both plans, much to community members' dismay.

Some of the major concerns raised by community members include:

The CPC should DENY the Amended Level A Master Plan and DEFER consideration of the Level B.II Plan because:

Santolina Continues the Legacy of Colonial Practices at the Expense of Communities

- **Sprawl development is detrimental to public health.** If approved, this mega sprawl development will contribute to poor health outcomes for future generations. Albuquerque's thriving neighborhoods are built around community resources and cultural lifeways, NOT a developer's hidden agenda.
- The proposed amendments would support **piecemeal** development without adequate oversight.
- The proposed amendments include "**waste disposal**" which potentially allows harmful landfills and dangle **solar/green energy** projects as **distractions**.
- Santolina continues the practice of an **extractive economy**, extracting water and other local resources to benefit the developers and their shareholders—an example of **environmental racism, with low-income people of color once again bearing the brunt of sprawl.**

The Santolina *Movida* will cost taxpayers! It violates the NO NET EXPENSE requirement! CPC should not approve of this latest "Bait and Switch."

- The County should **DENY the Amended Level A Plan** because the developers have **substantially worsened** the vision of the already flawed Santolina Master Plan!
- **The Amended Level A Plan is NOT a Planned Community.** WALH is proposing a **PIECEMEAL DEVELOPMENT** that does NOT meet Planned Communities Criteria.
- **A new economic analysis showing that it will not be an expense to the region** is required since the flawed original plan is based on outdated, high population growth rates.

Other Concerns and Reasons that the CPC should DENY Amended Level A and DEFER Level B.II:

- **CPC consideration of Level B.II is premature.**
- WALH claims its latest plans won't require **water** from the Water Utility Authority--they claim they will **haul water** and/or extract it **on-site. However, all water usage will impact our very limited water resources.**
- WALH continues to try to avoid water service requirements that bind and protect us all.
- Local groundwater extraction for a planned community is appropriately constrained by Bernalillo County and the State. WALH's new plans don't acknowledge that laws and regulations would prevent the use of on-site wells.
- The Atrisco Land Grant area that is now owned by Barclays Bank remains undeveloped because there is little or no water and that water quality is poor.
- WALH has not taken any of the many required steps specified by the Water Authority in 2018 to obtain water and sewer service.
- The Water Authority in 2018 estimated Santolina would have to pay \$659 million for infrastructure to meet Water Authority ordinances, policy, and engineering standards.
- The Level A Amendments continue to illustrate WAHL's concepts for water and sewer that were disapproved by the Water Authority's in 2018.
- Note: The owner of the land that would be covered by the Level BII Master Plan has rebranded to BernCo Investors LLC for reasons unknown to us.

Quotes from community members:

Marcia Fernandez, South Valley farmer, said, "Our South Valley community has been fighting Santolina for over 8 years. We knew what the threats to us and the environment were because they were in the Master Plan. Now that WALH wants to amend the Master Plan with vague mentions of energy generation and landfills, we don't know what the threat will become."

Patrick Jaramillo, American Friends Service Committee Co-director, said, “The concern from the beginning was water availability and appropriate use. This project may have started as a “master plan,” but now that it is clear that the water is simply not there, the developers have abandoned any plan and are wanting piecemeal development that provides no benefit to the community, only money for their shareholders.”

Julie Stephens, Community Planner, said, “WALH is asking the County through you, the CPC, to change fundamental aspects of the Santolina Plan without offering specifics or a new economic analysis to determine that no net costs would be met. Rather than giving WALH carte blanche to plan as they want at the expense of the public, WALH must reassess the validity of Level A, i.e. the Santolina Master Plan, overall and return with a new approach.”

Elaine Hebard, Member, Contra Santolina Working Group, said, “The Level A was approved 6 years ago -- but it wasn't viable then, according to Dr. O'Donnell, in part because of the unrealistic population projections. It would be unconscionable to continue the fantasy that population growth is going to be the same as used by WALH. While growth was projected to add 115,608 people to the County between 2010 and 2020, the reality was 15,815, or 13.7% of the original projection. Current population projections for the period from 2020 to 2040 are less than 7% of what was projected in 2012. Less growth translates into diminished demand.”

Kristine Suozzi, PhD, former NM Director of Public Health, said, “In 2014, a Health Impact Assessment demonstrated that the proposed Santolina development would harm public health with increases in obesity, diabetes, asthma, respiratory diseases, stroke, decreased immune responses, and cardiovascular disease. Now WALH's proposed amendments may even worsen public health outcomes. Issues such as "waste disposal" are ill-defined, and could mean anything from a landfill to a medical waste incinerator; both could have severe impacts on air and groundwater quality. The two factors that best predict a person's health outcomes are zip code and skin color. A Santolina zip code would be an unhealthy zip code.”

Alejandria M. Lyons, MCRP, Environmental Justice Organizer (SWOP), said, “Western Albuquerque Land Holdings (WALH) and their proprietors are only thinking about a return on their investment, but as residents and stewards of these agricultural lands we should be outraged about the proposed tire dump to be placed on the historic Atrisco Land Grant. The original plan came to our working group in 2013 and it did not include any indication that it would be environmentally viable, but now in 2021 the stakes are even higher. We are witnessing the worst climate crisis of our lifetimes; can Bernalillo County really afford Santolina's water extraction and degradation? We need the CPC to consider the long-term effects that these revised uses will have on future drinking water standards for our County.”

Dr. Virginia Necochea, Executive Director, NMELC, said, “For 8 long years the community has been standing up to protect limited water resources from this mega-sprawl development. It's important for the public to know that the developers have drastically changed their original master plan to a piecemeal development that includes various workarounds. It is our hope that after all of these years, the Bernalillo County Planning Commission and county staff will finally make the right decision and deny Santolina, especially given present-day climate conditions we are experiencing such as continued drought and increased temperatures. It's time to do right for the people and the environment.”

Maslyn Locke, NMELC Staff Attorney, said, “The proposed amendments to the Level A Master Plan and the proposed Level B.II Master Plan would ultimately result in a piecemeal development consisting of a patchwork of incompatible land uses and inappropriately creating an exception, through the Level B.II plan, to the approved land uses and vision of the Level A Master Plan approved in 2015. In recommending approval of the new proposed Level A Master Plan amendments, the County appears to be ignoring even their own assessment of the Plan, noting that the proposed changes and the land uses in the Level B.II Plan could, and likely do, signify an effort by WALH to by-pass the requirements that led to the Level A Master Plan’s initial approval, like obtaining an agreement with the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority to provide water and wastewater services to the Santolina area.”

Santiago Maestas, President, South Valley Regional Association of Acequias, said, “We ended the 2021 irrigation season without any water since August, except for the pueblos, who have prime and paramount water rights, and endangered species, which leased water from the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority, that kept the Rio Grande from going completely dry. Next year does not hold much promise of improvement for farmers and irrigators due to climate changes and a 96,000 acre-feet debt to the Interstate Compact. One expert believes that we will have to fallow thousands of acres of farmland for 3 years to repay this debt. Irrigators in the South Valley oppose the Santolina planned community on the Southwest Mesa, which would use 18 million gallons of water per day at full buildout. Farming in the Middle Rio Grande is now also an endangered species.”

Norm Gaume, MSCE, P.E., (ret.), former Director, NM Interstate Stream Commission, said, “Bernalillo County has turned its back on water sustainability, climate change impacts and the interests of County residents. 1) We don’t have the water. 2) Climate change will cause increased temperatures, much lower river flows, and less groundwater recharge. Substantial cutbacks to existing Middle Rio Grande water uses will be required. Santolina would make the supply and demand gap even wider and endanger the water supply for other Water Authority customers. 3) WALH has not acted in good faith to contract with the Water Authority for water supply and wastewater disposal services. 4) WALH’s Level A Master Plan Proposed Amendments continue to show water and sewer infrastructure concepts that were disapproved by the Water Authority in 2018. 5) The Water Authority’s conceptual plan to provide water and wastewater services to Santolina would reduce South Valley irrigators’ water.”

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Back in December 2021, County Staff recommended deferral of both Level A Amended Plan and the Level BII Plan for multiple reasons. They wanted the developer to meet with several different county agencies to address widespread problems in the plans that amounted to **piecemeal—not planned—development. The County’s multiple concerns remain compelling to community members despite the pivot by County Planning Staff who now are recommending that the CPC approve both plans.**

County Staff shared the following as part of their extensive written comments to the CPC back in December 2021:

“The applications argue that the changes to the Santolina Plan and framework are insignificant and will be beneficial. However, staff is concerned that proposed changes could extend or apply to other portions of Santolina, where specific land uses have been approved and where infrastructure and other agreed-to requirements must be met. This could also signify an effort to **delay or by-pass** some of the requirements that allowed the approval of Santolina back in 2015.”

The County's assessment of the new proposed amendments note the same concern, despite the staff's recommendation to approve the Amended Level A Master Plan:

“Staff is also concerned that the overall vision and intent of the Level A Master Plan is impacted or changed by the proposed changes in Level B.II and the accompanying Level A amendments. In particular, the request seems to advocate for **localized or piecemeal uses** or development that do not provide the required jobs and infrastructure and do not include an overall systemic approach to development.”

Oddly, despite the Staff's recommendation to approve the Level A Plan at the March 2 CPC meeting, County Staff note that they remain concerned that the proposed B.II Plan may constitute an isolated development that may be viewed as “piecemeal” and might negatively impact the development of Santolina as an integrated development as it was originally proposed. Instead of addressing this concern, however, County Staff appear to be recommending approval anyway, inexplicably creating an “exception” to the overall vision of the Level A Master Plan.

Community groups maintain that the Level A Master Plan must be denied and Level BII Master Plan should be deferred.

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