



Tuesday, September 17, 2024

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SOUTHERN NEW MEXICO RESIDENTS DEMAND ACCOUNTABILITY FROM STATE OFFICIALS ABOUT UNHEALTHY DRINKING WATER

Residents Ask What Actions State will Take to Address Water Crisis

SUNLAND PARK, NM—On Monday, September 16, 2024, the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) and the New Mexico Department of Health (NMDOH) held a public town hall in Sunland Park, New Mexico, about the ongoing water crisis and service issues by the Camino Real Regional Utility Authority (CRRUA).

NMED Secretary James Kenney moderated the meeting, which ran about two and a half hours long, was streamed live and can be viewed [here](#). Neither NMED nor NMDOH staff made presentations on health impacts of arsenic, which had been in the promotional materials for the Town Hall. The entire Town Hall consisted of taking questions and comments from audience members in the packed auditorium. Residents shared stories and directed their disappointment and frustration at state officials for dodging responsibility, passing the buck, lacking transparency, and taking too long to fix the water crisis problems.

Sunland Park resident and NMELC client **José Saldana** said, “The Governor promised us that the increase of the water was not going to happen. She promised us, the community, that she was going to stop the increase of the water bill and nothing has happened. So that’s why we made this meeting. And they should increase the water rates to the dispensaries and to the landfill.”

Vivian Fuller, Santa Teresa resident and organizer with Empowerment Congress, said, “I think we’re the ones being held accountable. We are the ones being punished by having this water and not getting any help to get clean water. We want transparency. It

took almost a year for NMED to respond to our complaints. EPA has not responded. It's very unfair that rates had to go up because there has been federal and state money coming in and the pumps were down for a year and a half. So what happened to the chemicals that were supposed to be used, what happened to the pumps, the labor that was supposed to be paid, and that money is nowhere to be found. We now have a new CRRUA Board and new management, but I think the state needs to help them out, needs to step in."



NMED Secretary James Kenney addresses community concerns at the Town Hall in Sunland Park on September 16, 2024.

The state agency-hosted public town hall comes after months of residents requesting information about, and more opportunities for engagement with, NMED's efforts to bring CRRUA into compliance with federal and state laws and regulations – after years of violations, ongoing contamination to the public water supply, and a consistent lack of public notice and communication.

Daisy Maldonado, Director, Empowerment Congress NM, said, "Communication and customer service by CRRUA has been very poor. We tried to reach them before this meeting and we had no success. Since the beginning of the year meetings are canceled and special meetings are called with little notice and people can't attend and make public comment. When is the next CRRUA board meeting? We don't even know. We encouraged CRRUA to hold their own town hall to build trust but they haven't taken our advice. Who should we ask to ensure they are doing their job? People and agencies are pointing at each other. Who holds quai-government accountable under a Joint Powers Agreement? Who is obligated to tell new homeowners and residents moving into Santa Teresa that you can't drink the water?"



José Saldana shared highlights from the Community Evaluation & Recommendations on the ERG Report on CRRUA at the Town Hall.

During the public questions and comments portion of the Town Hall, Saldana took the stage to share the [Community Evaluation and Recommendations Report](#) on the third-party evaluation and report on CRRUA released in mid-August by the Eastern Research Group (ERG), in contract with NMED and CRRUA. The Community Evaluation and Public Comment highlights key findings from the ERG Report, as well as provide recommendations for CRRUA as it continues to serve the communities of Sunland Park and Santa Teresa.

The Community Evaluation highlights CRRUA's broken equipment, inadequate monitoring and maintenance, lack of an emergency response plan and standardized procedures, and inadequate technical expertise, knowledge, and training held by CRRUA staff. The evaluation, written by NMELC and Empowerment Congress, made 5 recommendations, including that

- CRRUA should apply for and prioritize government funds towards maintenance and repairs, rather than relying on the raising of residential utility rates to fund CRRUA's operational expenses;

- the creation of a maintenance schedule;
- investing in necessary monitoring systems and equipment at all four Arsenic Treatment Facilities;
- mandatory and extensive training for CRRUA staff; and
- improving public notice procedures.

Kacey Hovden, NMELC Staff Attorney, said after the Town Hall, “While it’s appreciated that state officials were present in Sunland Park to listen to community members, simply hearing and validating concerns isn’t enough. The well-being and lives of residents are at stake, and it’s imperative that the State remains present, engaged, and takes meaningful action to ensure the communities of Sunland Park and Santa Teresa no longer bear the adverse health impacts and financial burdens of a responsibility that was never theirs: the consistent provision of clean and safe public water.”



At the end of the Town Hall, Secretary Kenney invited residents to contact NMED to schedule a visit to their homes to test the water and compare it to CRRUA’s test results. Residents can email Communications Director Drew Goretzka at drew.goretzka@env.nm.gov.

It remains unclear when the next CRRUA Board meeting will be held. The regularly scheduled monthly meeting for September 9 was [canceled](#).

***Empowerment Congress NM’s** goal is to transform high-need Dona Ana colonia communities into equitable, healthy and resourced places to live and enjoy a whole and prospered life. Nuestro objetivo es transformar las comunidades coloniales del condado dona ana con grandes necesidades en lugares equitativos, saludables, y con recursos para vivir y disfrutar de manera integral y próspera.*

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