

# Basic issues on Santolina still unsettled

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By [Susan Kelly / Attorney, Former Member Bernalillo County Planning Commission](#)

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I read with dismay the Albuquerque Journal's article (Sept. 1) on the recent five-hours-long Bernalillo County Commission meeting approving the next phase of the controversial Santolina development. Several years ago, the Journal's coverage of this important issue – a new town of 90,000 people proposed on vacant land on the Southwest Mesa – was quite informative. The reporter back then, Dan McKay, brought up the hard questions: Who benefits? Where does the water come from? Is this really a planned community or a taxpayer-subsidized bailout of a British bank that bought the 13,851-acre property in foreclosure and is trying to turn a profit?

A major point in the recent Journal article described Commissioner Wayne Johnson – a recent mayoral candidate – as “leading the charge to move the project forward.” He was joined by fellow Republican Lonnie Talbert, who asked not a single question all night, and Democrat Steven Michael Quezada in voting for approval of the Level B Plan. Missing from the article were important and largely unanswered questions by Commissioners Debbie O'Malley and Maggie Hart Stebbins who voted against it:

- O'Malley: Is this following the intent of the Comprehensive Plan to promote development contiguous to the metro area, or is it leap-frog development? No answer.
- O'Malley: Santolina negates the concerns of the community regarding water – it all comes from the same source doesn't it, the Rio Grande and its aquifer? Not a clear answer.
- Hart Stebbins: Is it clear that Open Space and public school sites will be donated? Or will the county and APS have to purchase them? Not clear.
- Hart Stebbins: Did the fiscal impact analysis performed for this development consider impact of Bernalillo County tax subsidies? No answer.

These were just a few of the many unanswered questions – there were many more from Quezada's South Valley constituents who adamantly oppose the project. In the past, the Journal did a good job of reporting on the large campaign contributions the Santolina developers and their associates made to support Quezada's campaign for county commissioner. His honeymoon as Gomey should have been over the day he was sworn in!

Attorney Jamie Park of the New Mexico Environmental Law Center, who is representing the opponents in court, raised many of the most important issues of the evening. It's a pretty long list, but here are a few items:

- There is insufficient information regarding how public/private expenses will be shared. For example, off-site transportation impacts are estimated to cost \$250 million. The cost of new schools, police and fire, and all of the other necessary public services will be in the hundreds of millions of dollars.
- The developer and the County Commission are deferring almost all the important issues to either a separate agreement or staff-only review. Park characterized the developer's proposed development agreement, which should outline cost-sharing and future responsibilities, as a “contract of adhesion.” This was defined by the county's attorney as a lopsided contract where one party reaps the majority of the benefits and the other party bears the burdens. It's pretty clear in this case which party is which!

The Journal has done a good job in the past of reporting the unanswered questions about the impact Santolina will have on Albuquerque and Bernalillo County. There is too much at stake for this huge development – 22 square miles – to move forward without answering basic questions now. Readers and taxpayers deserve more thorough reporting from the only remaining general circulation newspaper in Bernalillo County.