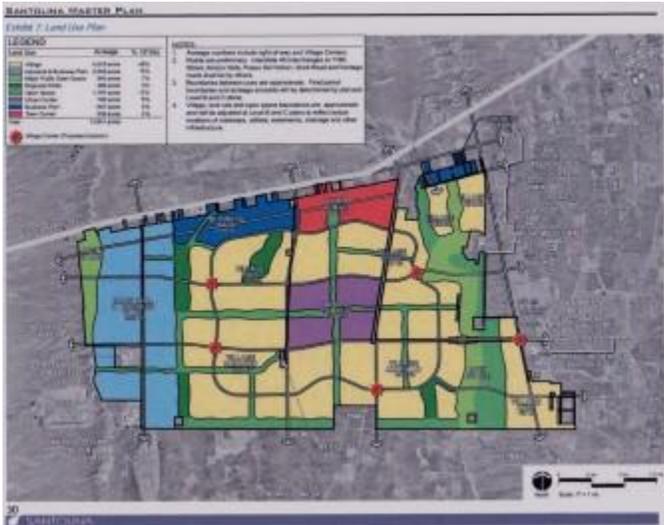


County commission should listen to objections to Santolina project

By [Carol Pittman and Catherine Landis](#) | July 8, 2015

COMMENTARY: On June 16, the Bernalillo County Commission approved Level A of the controversial Santolina master plan. This approval is the first step in a three-step process that requires increasingly specific land-use plans.



Courtesy photo

A map of the planned Santolina development southwest of Albuquerque. Click on the image to enlarge.

The Santolina Master Plan proposes a 13,800-acre development on the southwest edge of Albuquerque. Bounded by I-40 to the north and the Pajarito Mesa to the south, the huge project is intended to house nearly 100,000 new residents. [According to the developers](#), “approximately half of the Santolina community area will be devoted to residential uses, with about 30 percent devoted to employment (industrial, commercial) and about 20 percent to parks and open space uses.”

The developers’ model for attracting residents and businesses appears to be along the lines of “If we build it they will come,” a concept much disputed by the opponents of the project. And those opponents appear to have the facts on their side. Of the nation’s top 50 cities, 44 showed more growth than Albuquerque, which in fact has experienced a decline in population, [according to the news website Slate](#).

Last year, Forbes magazine noted that Albuquerque has the slowest job-growth [in the country](#). The 2014 UNM Bureau of Business and Economic Research report ranked New Mexico 48th among the 50 states in terms of job growth, and worst in the nation in terms of the disparity between upper- and lower-income residents.

Dr. Lee Reynis, the Bureau’s former director, in her 2014 presentation [“New Mexico Economy: Recent Developments and Outlook,”](#) pointed to both stagnant population growth and a weak real estate market as drags on economic recovery, and the state’s reliance on construction jobs to boost economic activity as poor strategy.

In addition to its lack of realistic economic projections, Santolina fails to provide a model to meet the needs of the very population it hopes to attract. David Vogel, noted researcher, teacher, philanthropist, and former national management consultant, pointed out in [a commentary](#) published by New Mexico Political Report that, “We already know from extensive studies that the younger generations of professionals prefer to live where they and their families can thrive in a healthy, vibrant and sustainable community, where good jobs are

plentiful, the cost of living is reasonable and their increasing demand for carefully planned, highly developed urban infrastructure is readily met.”

Looking like Detroit in 10 years?

If Albuquerque lags the nation in growth, and already has 15,000 vacant homes, why have county commissioners approved another sprawling new development that will further stress water, roads, schools and other infrastructure?

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Has the commission asked the project developers to identify where this “new growth” is coming from? Or will the project simply rely on people moving out of older neighborhoods, further damaging the city core and creating even more vacant homes?

Do the commissioners want the city to look like Detroit 10 years from now, with far more vacant and decaying homes than new residents?

Alan Reed, former Albuquerque City Councilor, points out that the “Arguments that Santolina will provide jobs and business activity do not hold up in the face of overwhelming historical evidence to the contrary. Every job located there will be at the cost of a job or a construction project in the current metro area.” That’s in [an opinion piece](#) published by the Albuquerque Journal.

Possible effect in Catron County

The Santolina project may also adversely affect Catron County. The Augustin Plains Ranch LLC (APR LLC) has applied to the Office of the State Engineer to extract 54,000 acre feet of water every year from the Augustin Plains Basin, put it in a pipe and send it to points [east and north](#).

The proposed pipeline would proceed from the APR LLC to Socorro and then go north, passing in the vicinity of the Santolina and the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority Facility.

Those who live in Catron County are concerned about the possible relationship of the Santolina project to the Augustin Plains Ranch LLC’s attempt to mine water in the Augustin Plains Basin — a project which would destroy the basin and much of Catron County if scarce water is diverted from its present use in order to supply the Santolina development.

Not listening

County commissioners appear to be turning a deaf ear to public objection to the Santolina plan. With the room full of protestors waiting to testify, the commission voted last month to put the public hearing at the end of the discussion of the motions to approve the Santolina, and to terminate the hearing by 4:30 p.m.

While the hearing actually ended at 5:37 p.m., many in the room had left, believing they would not have the opportunity to speak.

One woman testified to the likelihood that the decision to put the public hearing at the end was a deliberate ploy to reduce the number of people present. Chairwoman Maggie Hart Stebbins denied that assertion, but the public has been unable to speak at other scheduled public hearings and it is hard to deny a pattern, whatever the reason.

A subsequent hearing, held on June 24, granted approval to the development agreement, a binding contract with the county. Stebbins and Commissioner Debbie O’Malley attempted to tighten requirements on the project but were unable to muster support from the three remaining commissioners, Art De La Cruz, Wayne Johnson and Lonnie Talbert.

De La Cruz, in fact, attempted to cut off debate entirely in order to pass the agreement without discussion on amendments. Apparently his approval of the project was already assured, and he felt no need to listen to opposing opinions.

The decision of the Bernalillo County Commission in favor of the Santolina project could benefit two foreign corporations – Barclay’s Bank, owner of the Santolina project’s land, and potentially the Augustin Plains Ranch LLC (Italian) – at the expense of the people who live here. The county commission was remiss in its refusal to listen to the people who live here and who have voiced their objections to the project and its potential for stripping the Augustin Plains Basin of its water.

Carol Pittman lives on a small ranch in Datil, Catron County, near the Plains of San Augustin. She is retired from the University of California where she worked as an administrative assistant. She was a founding member of the [San Augustin Water Coalition](#), is an organizer of the opposition to the Augustin Plains water grab, and a supporter of local water rights. Catherine Landis is the general manager of a property management company in El Paso, Texas. She is a former television news reporter, social scientist, and management analyst.