

Tucson's Birthplace: Will We Protect It?

A Position Paper by the Barrio Neighborhood Coalition

As a local grass-roots group comprised of active community members and representatives of various neighborhood associations, social service workers, and labor, the Barrio Neighborhood Coalition works together to fight gentrification and displacement in Tucson and to ensure that residents have a seat at the table to promote public policy that increases affordability and preserves Tucson's history, beauty, and cultural diversity. This is why the BNC is asking for public support to preserve the unique area known as "Tucson's Birthplace" from inappropriate development that will gentrify and displace the residents in the area. The BNC instead is in support of the proposal that will promote a wildlife refuge with open space that honors the historic site with due respect.

Tucson derives its name from the O'Odham village that once existed at the base of A Mountain: it was called "*Chuk Son*" and meant "*at the foot of the black mountain.*" This unique place, where the Sonoran Desert greets the Santa Cruz River, has historically sustained many different cultural groups starting with the Hohokam (the ancestors of the Tohono O'Odham) to the widely diverse populations that now comprise the Tucson area.

In our era, and over time, this land transitioned from agricultural farmland to clay mining and fabrication of red bricks that were popular in the building of many local homes. After the demand for red bricks played out, the clay pits were abandoned and just left "*as is.*" The City Fathers, without regard for the rich history of the Tucson's Birthplace — no less the health and welfare of the Barrio residents of Sin Nombre, Menlo Park, Kroger Lane, Santa Cruz, Anita, Viejo and Hollywood — created multiple landfills along the west bank of the Santa Cruz River. The A Mountain landfill, Congress and Nearmount landfills surround the Historic Sites of the Mission San Agustin and Barrio Sin Nombre. These landfills were in operation for many years, closing in the mid 1960's when they were capped in the hope of limiting the release of methane, an odorless but toxic gas.

In November of 1999 the voters of the City of Tucson approved Proposition 400 that created the **Rio Nuevo Tax Increment Financing (TIF) District**. The voters approved the use of these sales taxes to fund the construction of a museum district including the Mission Gardens, and what is known as the Convento, and the Carrillo sites. Promoted as the "*Tucson Origins Heritage Park*" the projects were to be located on the west side of Tucson, adjacent to Barrio Sin Nombre. The City of Tucson established the first Rio Nuevo Board and proceeded to spend millions of tax dollars, raising serious public concern about the misuse of those public monies.

Following claims of mismanagement by the City of Tucson, the State of Arizona took over and appointed a new Rio Nuevo Board. They set out spending TIF District sales taxes for the renovation of the Tucson Convention Center. TIF monies would also be used to help with the construction of a new hotel downtown, which was eventually built next to the TCC. The Rio Nuevo Board took as its primary mission the re-development of the downtown core, and leveraged public TIF dollars to help benefit private development in the re-investment ("*revitalization*") of downtown. This generally continues to be the Rio Nuevo's Board main purpose today; to make investment in downtown profitable for more development.

However, the legislation that created the new Rio Nuevo Board stipulated that once those projects (the Convention Center and hotel) were completed, an “*order to proceed*” could be given and the district could revert back to developing the original voter-approved projects.

This has never happened.

In 2012 the Menlo Park Neighborhood Association adopted a position paper favoring **open space and restoration of the Sonoran Desert Park on the A Mountain landfill site**, a plan that has been endorsed by other barrio residents and neighborhood organizations.

In that same period (February 2013) an agreement from a lawsuit was reached between Rio Nuevo and the City of Tucson and certain resources were then distributed between the two entities. As a result, the 28 acres that comprise the A Mountain Landfill were transferred from the City of Tucson to the Rio Nuevo Board. This transfer included the land, and also included the liability associated with mitigating the landfill.

Rio Nuevo has explored several different proposals to develop the land and the landfill. First was the creation of a “cowboy venue” with a restaurant and arena, but the proposal was vetoed by many residents, especially those living closest in Menlo Park who expressed concerns over traffic on Mission Road and the inability to widen that road due to the location of a major gas line. Next was a proposed “Velodrome” bicycle racing area, and this idea was likewise vetoed by many area residents. This was followed by the proposed gifting of the land to the San Xavier District of the Tohono O’Odham Nation.

A presentation was made by Rio Nuevo to the San Xavier District Council regarding the gifting of the land, but with a requirement for them to take responsibility for the remediation of the landfill. The San Xavier Council responded by advising that they would be interested after Rio Nuevo remediated the landfill, but they didn’t want to assume the liability of environmental mitigation of the city landfills.

Now a new player, supposedly well-versed in remediation of distressed sites with landfill contamination issues, has emerged in the process. The UrbanStreet Group (USG) of Chicago has been in dialogue with the Rio Nuevo Board for the last 8 months and they have a Tucson attorney who is very knowledgeable in negotiating land deals. The Chicago group may also have experience obtaining Federal Brownfield and Environmental Justice grants dealing with environmental mitigations.

The Rio Nuevo Board has indicated it will gift UrbanStreet Group the 28 acres if they remediate the landfill. Rio Nuevo can offer several incentives, such as sharing the sales tax that the developer generates from a mixed-use property, develop underground parking, provide low interest loans, or help with a Government Property Lease Excise Tax (**GPLET**), which could exempt the developer from paying the full property taxes for years.

The Chicago team is proposing to build clusters of multi-story apartment buildings and rental townhouses. Since the cost to remediate the environmental problems may run up to \$2.5 million per acre, the development will likely be luxury market rate apartments. The developer is planning on a “20% capital return” rate. In order to build to this scale, USG will need to have the property rezoned from an R-1 to a much more intensive commercial zoning. This will be a city rezoning process that requires **neighborhood participation and engagement**.

Consistent with our mission, the Barrio/Neighborhood Coalition has raised concerns over the increased density and the displacement and gentrification of our barrios. The USG project would drastically impact the traditional barrios, including barrios Sin Nombre, Menlo Park, Kroger Lane, Santa Cruz, Anita, Viejo, and

Hollywood. Property values would increase, driving up property taxes and rents and causing further displacement of our residents — primarily those on fixed incomes. Traffic on Mission Road and Grande Avenue would be substantially increased with this level of density, and the health, safety and welfare of our residents would be at risk. The historic uniqueness of the Barrios and Tucson's Birthplace will be lost forever.

An alternative has been offered by the Sonoran Institute, a nonprofit environmental group that has been working on the restoration of the Santa Cruz River. They produce an annual publication entitled "A Living River." They, too, have been in discussions with Rio Nuevo and have also been offered a gifting of the land if they remediate the 28 acres. The Sonoran Institute's plan is to create a wildlife refuge for the area — an extremely important environmental element during this drought which would provide wildlife a corridor to the Santa Cruz river. As an equity issue, the added urban green space would also help to counter the urban heat island effects for the surrounding barrios, where a recent study indicated that this area is routinely hotter than other parts of Tucson. **The Barrio Neighborhood Coalition supports this alternative.** We believe the Sonoran Institute's proposal is the best plan to honor the history of the area and to help protect the Sonoran Desert and its wildlife, as well as complementing, and protecting, the work of the Mission Garden.

As concerned citizens and active members of our neighborhood associations, the Barrio Neighborhood Coalition asks that you endorse and support open space and the Sonoran Institute's wildlife refuge plan to appropriately protect the birthplace of Tucson and the current inhabitants of the area.

Signed,

Barrio Neighborhood Coalition