

Bernalillo County approves new Santolina plans despite public objections, water access issues. Opponents urged electeds to reject ‘massive, unneeded new development’

By: [Austin Fisher](#) - August 19, 2022 5:05 am

<https://sourcencm.com/2022/08/19/bernalillo-county-commissioners-approve-new-santolina-plans-despite-public-objections-water-access-issues/>

(Related: 8/17/22 <https://dchieftain.com/water-rights-case-gets-bounced-back-to-district-court/>)

Bernalillo County elected officials on Tuesday voted unanimously to approve two sets of plans for the Santolina development, over the objections of community members and the county’s own planning board.

The Bernalillo County Board of Commissioners voted 4-0 to approve two requests by [Western Albuquerque Land Holdings](#) (WALH) to speed up the development’s timeline from 50 to 30 years, and add a recycling plant to the area planned in southwest Albuquerque metro.

Commissioner Adrian Barboa used language of the climate justice movement to justify her vote.

“My family, for multiple generations, has come and fought for our water,” Barboa said. “I’m only here because of the access to the acequias and the waters that my grandfather cultivated for our family. I consider myself an environmental justice advocate. I believe water is sacred, and is life.”

The county’s Planning Commission in March [voted not to recommend](#) those changes to the full County Commission. It remains unclear where water for the subdivision will come from, because it does not include any request to tap into water reserves, or for water and sewer services from the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Authority (ABCWA).

Outside the commission chambers, protesters with the Contra Santolina Working Group chanted, “No WALH, no sprawl!”

The vote came after a brief hearing in which members of the public testified under oath against the development. Other than the developers themselves, everyone who testified on Tuesday afternoon opposed the development.

Jorge Garcia, member of the Armijo Ranchos de Atrisco Acequia and executive director of the [Center for Social Sustainable Systems](#), asked commissioners to uphold the planning commission’s denial.

Garcia suggested that the development is a business venture that will change the city’s landscape and compromise the availability of water, and he said approving it would give in to the desires of housing development executives.

“It would be just a benefit to their business adventures,” Garcia testified. “What people are against is the fact that excessive growth for which there is no water compromises the future of our children and our grandchildren, just to satisfy the needs of a small minority of people who stand to benefit from this development.”

Albuquerque resident Mimi Lopez urged the commissioners to adopt the recommendation of the planning commission and testified that the community is facing a critical shortage of water.

New Mexico and the Southwest are experiencing a historic drought, the effects of which are being significantly exacerbated by climate change, she said. The recent dying of the Rio Grande won’t be the last time, Lopez

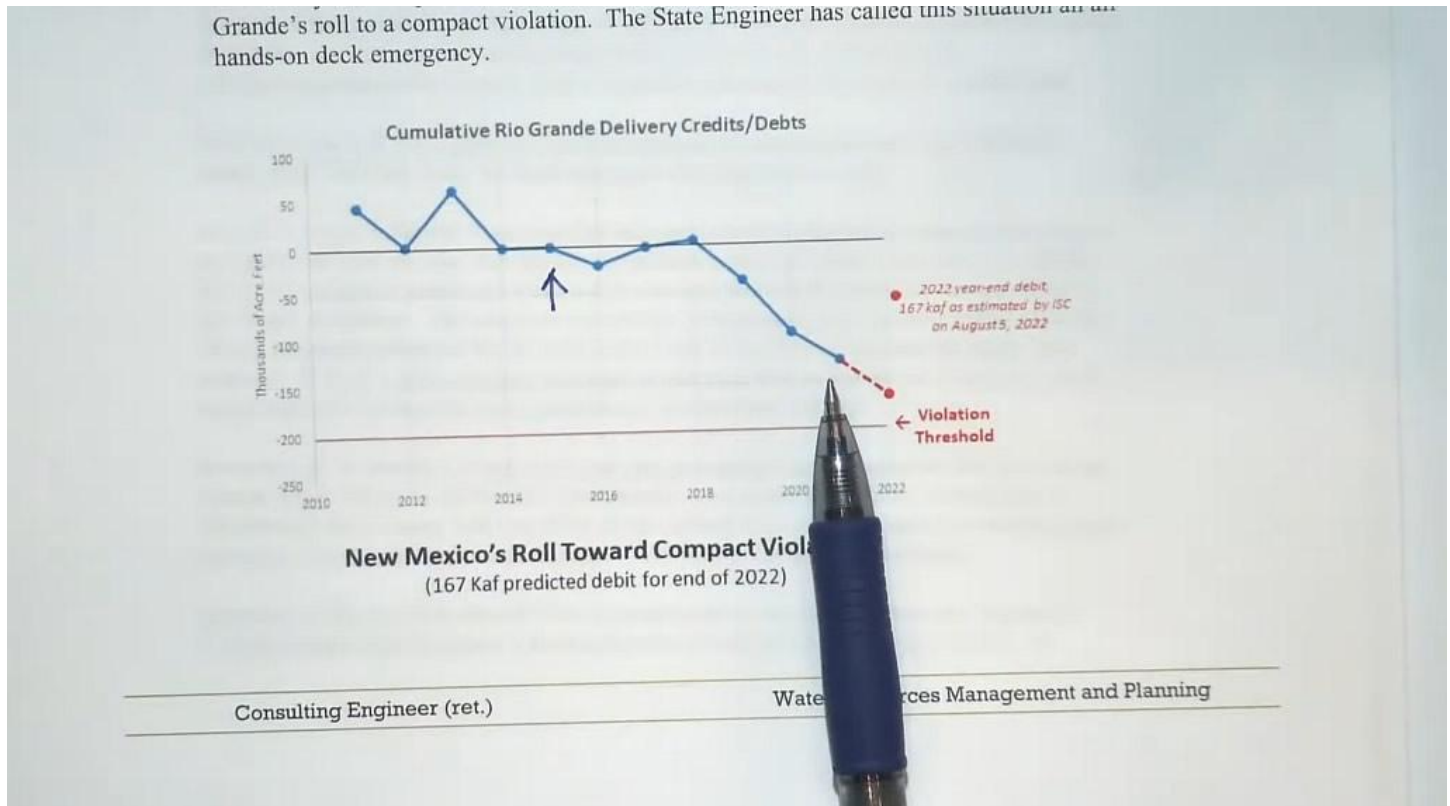
testified. New Mexico uses Colorado River water, and currently has no means of increasing its water supply, she testified.

“Under the current extreme drought conditions, I contend that it is the epitome of foolishness and irresponsibility to do anything to aid and abet a massive, unneeded new development,” Lopez said.

Norm Gaume showed commissioners a chart indicating the cumulative water credits and debits through the Middle Rio Grande owed to the water users below the Elephant Butte Reservoir. Gaume is a retired water engineer, former water resources manager for the city of Albuquerque and former director of the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission.

Commission staff estimated in July that New Mexico is 40,000 acre feet behind in deliveries made to Elephant Butte Reservoir, [according](#) to Rolf Schmidt-Petersen, the director of the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission.

“Meaning that we are less than a year, on this current trend, away from a compact violation,” Gaume testified. “I don’t have time to tell you how bad that could be, but it would be really bad for the Middle Valley, and it would be really bad for the state of New Mexico.”



(Courtesy of Bernalillo County)

Susan Schuurman, a Bernalillo County resident, urged commissioners to adopt the recommendation by the planning commission to deny Santolina’s plans.

“The bottom line is there’s not enough water for current users, let alone a massive new housing development that population trends indicate is not needed or sustainable,” Schermann testified. “Approving these plans, in fact, would be environmental racism: taking water away from low-income people of color in the South Valley who have irrigated their fields from acequias for generations, and giving it to out-of-state investors.”

Patrick Jaramillo asked county officials to look outside and consider the future.

“Water is life for us as individuals, water is life for us as a community,” Jaramillo testified. “There is no water, and there will be less — honestly I’m speechless. The fact that this is being considered is beyond reason.”

In his testimony against the project, Jaramillo said there is no water for the development.

“What is our future? It’s gonna blow away,” Jaramillo said. “Our future is gonna blow away in the wind. And if you approve, you will be culpable.”

(See also: <http://www.informedcynic.com/water-grab.html>)