



EL PASO COUNTY, TEXAS  
DAVID C. STOUT  
COUNTY COMMISSIONER, PRECINCT TWO

January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Mr. Greg Smith  
Coordinator, Federal Programs  
Texas Historical Commission  
1511 Colorado St.  
Austin, Texas 78711

Cc: Mark Wolfe, Executive Director, Texas Historical Commission  
Judy George-Garza, Program Specialist, Federal Programs, Texas Historical Commission

Mr. Smith:

My name is David Stout and I am the El Paso County Commissioner that represents Precinct 2, which includes central and Downtown El Paso. I write you today to emphatically support El Paso County's proposal to have our beautiful and historic Downtown nominated as an historic district on the National Register for Historic Places (NRHP).

I began working on this endeavor back in late 2015, my first year in office, when the El Paso City Council, which had begun the process to do the same, abruptly halted their proposal to move forward with the historical architectural survey that would serve as a basis for the nomination. They did so even though the Texas Historical Commission (THC) had offered to help pay for nearly half of the cost. I understand that you all may have even reached into your operating budget to provide a little extra for this amazing and much deserving project. Many of us were dumbfounded as to why the City opted not to move forward, but with the help of the preservationist community, in early 2016 I was able to convince my colleagues on the El Paso County Commissioners Court to unanimously support taking up the effort on our end.

Unfortunately, our process has taken longer than we had hoped. Throughout 2016 we dealt with delays due to turnover in our purchasing department and it was not until mid-2017 that we were able to complete that procurement process and get a contract inked with the consultant we chose to undertake the historical architectural survey, Hardy Heck and Moore (HHM). They completed phase one of the survey by mid to late 2018, however another barrier came about in the form of an ordinance the City had on its books that, according to their interpretation, would place additional restrictions upon property owners within the proposed district if it were to be created. We lost nearly two years waiting, in good faith, for the City to remove the ordinance, as they had promised. In the end, they refused to do so, even though their City Planning Commission and their Historic Landmark Commission voted in support of removal. That ordinance was later discovered to be unenforceable and became a moot point, so, in early 2020 the Commissioners Court decided to move forward with our survey process. After an additional windshield survey that had to be undertaken due to the time that had lapsed, we found that no substantial changes

occurred in the number of assets considered to be historic and therefore contributing, and we finalized and published the survey in August of 2020.

As a result of the survey, we discovered that El Paso's core has close to one thousand historic structures, of which nearly two hundred could be placed on the National Register for Historic Places individually. This is one of the largest concentrations of historic assets in the American Southwest. The original plan was to create one large district, however, after consultation with you and Hardy Heck and Moore, it was decided the best opportunity for inclusion of as many buildings as possible within the boundaries of a district with an historic designation by the NRHP would be to create two smaller districts with larger concentrations of historic properties. After much debate and public input, we decided on the boundaries for the Downtown District proposal which are being put forth to you in your review board meeting on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021. At a subsequent review board meeting, you will see the proposal for the second district, named for the large neighborhood it encompasses, Segundo Barrio (second ward).

Our outreach process has been thorough, discussing all details that have gone into this proposal during numerous public meetings over a five-year span, as well as holding meetings for property owners and reaching out to them individually. As a result of our outreach to property owners, we received no opposition from them, whatsoever. We have also been in constant contact with the City and its staff over those same five years, most transparently apprising them of all details involved and every step we have taken.

As you know, this is a very important project for me and for El Paso County, and the testament to that is, though it has taken time and we have faced barriers, we did not give up. Here we are, again, asking you to help us take the final, important steps toward making this historic district a reality. We have spent countless hours and hundreds of thousands of dollars to get to where we are right now, and we hope it has been worth it. Not just because of the effort put forth on my or the county's behalf, but because this has truly been a community effort. A vast number of people from so many different backgrounds that have made phone calls, written letters and emails and shown up to wait hours on end in public meetings for their turn to speak in support of this project, even if for only three minutes. They have been waiting very patiently because they know how important the history in the Downtown area is, not only for this community, but for our state and country, especially as demographics trend toward greater populations of people of color, most notably, those of Hispanic descent.

Right in the middle of this historic designation proposal lies El Paso's first platted neighborhood, known as Duranguito, which holds great historic significance for indigenous, Spanish, Mexican and even Chinese cultures that helped shape El Paso. This neighborhood, as well as others in our City's core, provide numerous examples of the stories about those cultures that make our community unique. However, much of the leadership in El Paso, over the years, has done a lackluster job of sharing such stories with the world. Moreover, many of those leaders have, unfortunately, seen no significance in the history of the people of color who have inhabited and built this area, and have attempted to do away with these neighborhoods, erasing them completely, in the name of "progress". This is happening, right now, with the Duranguito neighborhood. The City of El Paso has been intent upon destroying the neighborhood in order to replace it with a D-league basketball arena since 2016, and based on non-expert opinion, they argue it has no history worth saving. They continuously gaslight the public by making this claim, knowing full well that they commissioned a study for their transit system, Sun Metro, back in 1998, which showed, in fact, there are many historic assets in Duranguito. In addition, after conducting the aforementioned windshield survey in 2020 as part of the County's process in applying for this historic district nomination, our expert consultants, Hardy Heck and Moore, tell us, as well, there actually are thirteen historic buildings in Duranguito. The City, nevertheless, decided to take part in illegally attempting to demolish a number of those historic buildings in late 2017, after a court ruled they should not be touched,

and five of the thirteen sustained damage. By doing so, they got themselves into a protracted legal battle with local preservationists that has lasted more than three years and remains unresolved.

All of this is important to understand because it seems to have led the recently ousted former mayor to oppose the inclusion of the Duranguito neighborhood in our Downtown Historic District nomination application. It is hard to understand why the opposition has arisen, since, as you know, the designation we are requesting would be honorific, not bringing about any additional regulations nor limits upon property owners within the proposed district. Therefore, it would not have any bearing on the City's litigation, and it certainly would not stop them from demolishing Duranguito if the courts decide to allow them to go forward. There is nothing negative that could come for the City with this designation, other than it would further debunk their untrue statements regarding the existence of historic assets in Duranguito.

The negative effects of excluding Duranguito from our proposal, however, would be great. It would create a non-contiguous boundary, a donut hole smack dab in the middle of our proposed district. This could, as you know, immensely hinder our opportunity to attain the historic designation we seek. Close to twenty percent of the one thousand buildings that are considered contributing would no longer be eligible for those much-coveted historic tax credits that would free up millions of dollars for much needed renovation, creating countless jobs. It would also diminish our opportunities to really put El Paso on the map for heritage tourism, causing us to lose out on the chance to tell our stories to the world. As for Duranguito itself, the future is uncertain, but there is certainty that the cost of building the D-league basketball arena that would go in its place has ballooned from \$180 million to over \$250 million, and even if the City wins its litigation with preservationists, there may not be public will, nor a will amongst the new City Council to move forward with that project. If that happens and somehow, we get a designation while excluding Duranguito, or if we get no designation at all, the chances of ultimately saving the neighborhood that is such a grand symbol of our identity in El Paso, become much slimmer because without historic tax credits, it will be much more difficult to restore those damaged buildings to their prior glory.

In closing, I give you great thanks for all the enthusiastic, disinterested work you have done to assist the County and our community in making this project a reality. You have become a strong ally in our endeavors to bring benefits to El Paso that will last for many, many years to come. We trust that you and the THC will help us take this next step on this journey, allowing El Paso to start changing its course. It is time we respect all the cultures that make El Paso what it is and that we exalt that history so that those who do not know us can come to do so, and so those who have forgotten can rediscover. However, we cannot do this without this most important historic designation in our Downtown.

Should you have any questions or concerns please feel free to contact me at 915-546-2111.

In service,



David C. Stout  
County Commissioner  
El Paso County, Precinct 2