

El Paso County Commissioners Court
500 E. San Antonio, Suite 101
El Paso, Texas 79901

June 25th, 2020

Donald J. Sevigny
9809 Cornus Lane
El Paso, TX 79925

To the Honorable Commissioners Court:

I am writing to comment on the continuing discussion regarding the proposed Segundo Barrio Historic District. My current roles as the Architectural Historian at Fort Bliss, Chair of the El Paso Historic Landmark Commission (HLC), and Board of Directors for the Texas Chapter of the Association of Preservation Technology have afforded me a unique perspective on the complexity of the issue at hand. That being said, I am not representing these organizations; I am writing to you as a historic preservation professional and concerned citizen of this county.

After watching your most recent discussion from Monday, June 22nd, there are two major items I would like to address. First, a question was asked about determining if the western portion of Segundo Barrio should be in the proposed Downtown Historic District to be more attractive to investors. While federal and state tax incentives are available to properties within national historic districts, these benefits are not the primary reason for their establishment. These districts are formed to highlight the collective events, people, and architecture of an entire area that would otherwise not be individually eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. The proposed Downtown Historic District is defined by tall office buildings rooted in the ideals of Chicago's Louis Sullivan and banks adorned in eclectic revival styles reflecting the stylistic roots of Europe. Segundo Barrio is fundamentally different. It grew organically over generations of immigrant families and individuals coming and going through the neighborhood. The fact that adobe construction is still in this part of the city is phenomenal. These buildings are leagues better than any of the "Olde Towne" tourist sites peppered across the Sun Belt, and should be recognized and honored for their resilience. The same is true for the intangible heritage of Segundo Barrio. The traditions and culture of the neighborhood are incredibly rare in today's society. Across the country, close-knit neighborhoods like Segundo Barrio disappeared through unregulated urban renewal, Interstate highway expansion, and the gradual decline of compact downtowns in favor of home ownership in the suburbs. The local cultures disappeared when these neighborhoods were demolished. Despite these national trends, Segundo Barrio remains strong. A historic district should be formed to help protect the strengths this community already embodies instead of encouraging outside investors to recklessly gentrify the neighborhood.

Second, there appears to be an assumption that Hardy, Heck & Moore (HHM) were hired by the County to provide a final say in how the Downtown and Segundo Barrio Historic Districts should be delineated. I strongly disagree with this opinion. While I agree that HHM's role is to develop a survey, Determination of Eligibility, and National Register nomination for these districts, those are strictly technical matters. If you delegate the final decision to the consultants, community stakeholders will be left out of the process. The Court's decision ought to be based on the interest of the stakeholders who live and work in the proposed historic district. This is not something that should be taken lightly. My tenure on the HLC has given me valuable insight on the power of public comments, and hold the opinions of neighborhood associations in high regard. Numerous individuals made public comments during the meeting on June 22nd. As public servants, we must understand that comments from community stakeholders are more valuable than a firm that has no long-term interest in the local community after the project is completed. The community stakeholders, not the consulting firm, will be directly impacted by your decisions on June 29th.

In order to enact positive long-term change, those of us fortunate enough to hold public office have an obligation to educate themselves and support the community they were elected to represent. This vote will itself make

history, and each Commissioner has the rare opportunity to make an impactful decision that will affect generations to come. I strongly urge you to listen to the community members who so passionately shared their thoughts. By voting for Option 3, you will help bring Segundo Barrio the national recognition it so clearly deserves.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "D.J. Sevigny", is placed over a light blue rectangular background.

D.J. Sevigny