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Daniel Collins
Staff Reporter

In response to the ongoing controversy over the city's adoption of the El Paso Downtown 2015 Plan, the Paso del Sur group, along with UTEP's history and African American Studies departments are sponsoring a two-evening film festival called Communities Under Siege that will show documentaries that focus on other instances of urban displacement in the U.S./Mexico borderlands. This free event will begin Thursday, Jan. 25 at 5:30 p.m. in the Business Administration Building, room 309, and continue the next evening at 6 p.m. in room 302 of the Education Building.

On Oct. 31 of last year, the El Paso City Council voted by a 5-3 margin to adopt the El Paso Downtown 2015 Plan. Since its initial introduction to the council, this ambitious plan to redevelop nearly 300 acres of Downtown and South El Paso has been met with fierce opposition from both residents of the affected areas as well as business owners and operators. Many of the plan's opponents believed that the targeted areas were home to significant historical properties and history and accused proponents of the plan of excluding the poorer residents of areas like El Segundo Barrio.

One of the opposition's larger voices belongs to the Paso del Sur group, which is composed of academicians, students and professional people concerned with preserving the Segundo Barrio.

"I think the plan caught a large group of us by surprise," said David Romo, a member of Paso del Sur group. Romo is also an El Paso historian, a writer for the Texas Observer and author of "Ringside Seat to a Revolution," a book detailing South El Paso's part in the Mexican Revolution.

"A lot of us have been involved in South El Paso and Downtown El Paso for many, many years. The Paso Del Norte Group planned this in a very secretive way and they just excluded everybody including residents, and small business owners," Romo said. "That's what was so offensive I think to a lot of people; that a lot of this plan was created and discussed through the politics of exclusion."

Still, proponents of the plan, including members of the Paso del Norte Group, developers and politicians who initially developed and supported the plan claim that development in that historic area of El Paso would be an economic boon to a region they believe to be performing less than desired financially, attracting better businesses to the city's Downtown and increasing tourism. The Paso del Norte Group, a group of more than 300 area business people, developed the current redevelopment model with SMWM, a San Francisco urban planning firm. Most recently, since passing the Downtown plan, the City Council passed a motion to designate the redevelopment zone a Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone, where the funds generated by increases in property taxes for that area would be allocated to future development plans.

City officials expect to see some development begin in 2007 with full development completed within the next 10 to 15 years.

"The numbers have shown that right now there is not as much activity as we would like down there. The structures haven't been kept up and there's a lot of new ideas that have come about to go ahead and revitalize that whole area; to bring people from all over the city as well as tourists to our downtown area," said Juli Lozano, the communications and public affairs manager for the city. "It has a lot of potential. It has a lot of history. It has a lot of culture, as you can tell from the opposition, and it's a prime location to go ahead and revitalize and show off our culture; show off everything we have to offer in our city."

Romo states that local news media have done little to link the current Downtown plan with a larger national movement against the abusive use of eminent domain by major cities. Romo believes that ethical use of eminent domain can only be in instances where public works like schools are to be developed and sees similar land grabs that give properties to private companies as unfair since those companies have many more resources with which to gain land over existing small businesses.

"What council has also said is that (eminent domain) is the last resort, so it's not like their going to go in and 'ok, it's this date, we're going to take things over.' There are a lot of different things they can do. They can try and work with the property owners, try and work so that everyone is happy," said Lozano.

On Dec. 19, the city passed a resolution that says the City Council will not consider the use of eminent domain for the Downtown Plan until Nov. 1 2008.

"Whether you push something that's wrong back or not, that's not the issue; it's wrong on principle. If you have a gun and say 'oh, well, I'm not going to use it for two years,' well, it's still wrong to use that gun if you're pulling it out on people who haven't done anything." Romo said. "You're losing the Ellis Island of the border because, especially in the Segundo Barrio,

