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## Mayors urge state to deny Asarco air permit

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Aurelia Roque, left, of El Paso and Natalia Francis, right, of Sunland Park, N.M., held signs opposing **Asarco** on Thursday during a meeting of the mayors of Juárez, Sunland Park and El Paso. The mayors signed a resolution opposing the renewal of the copper smelter's air permit. The meeting took place Monument 1 on the riverbed where the states of Texas, New Mexico and Chihuahua come together. El Paso Mayor John Cook, Juárez Mayor Héctor Murguía and Sunland Park Mayor Ruben Segura, along with their councils, met Thursday on the banks of the Rio Grande to sign a resolution opposing the reopening of **Asarco's** copper smelter in West El Paso.

The historic meeting was the first session of its kind to take place near Monument 1 on the riverbed where the states of Texas, New Mexico and Chihuahua come together.

Elected officials said the site was selected as a show of unity against **Asarco**.

For the past few years, **Asarco** has been seeking to have the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality renew its air permit from 1992. The smelter, at 2301 W. Paisano, has been idle since 1999.

The decision on whether to renew the air-quality permit is still months away, but the three mayors hope their resolution will help persuade the Texas commission to deny **Asarco's** request.

The mayors signed the resolution opposing the renewal of **Asarco's** air-quality permit after their councils approved it.

"I'm very hopeful that we are going to be able to convince them (TCEQ officials) that this entire region is opposed to **Asarco** reopening," Cook said. "There is no obligation by the state of Texas to issue an air-pollution

permit, and that's what **Asarco** is requesting. They are requesting a permit to pollute our air, and we are saying no -- we don't want it. We appreciate everything **Asarco** has done for this community in the past, but their time has come to an end."

Lairy Johnson, **Asarco's** environmental manager in El Paso, said air emissions from the copper smelter, if reopened, would not cause or contribute to air pollution or cause health risks. Johnson based his comments on independent studies he said were conducted by local, state and federal environmental departments.

Johnson said the reasoning for the municipalities' opposition to the air-quality permit was based on outdated scientific data.

"Looking at their resolution, again a lot of it is dated material. A lot of it is they are referencing to a copper smelter that doesn't exist anymore or a situation that doesn't exist," he said.

Johnson said that the smelter was modernized in the early '90s and that on May 1, 2007, the TCEQ executive director issued a favorable recommendation in support of the restart of the smelter. The recommendation, he said, states that the air emissions meet all the air-quality standards.

El Pasoan Laura Najera said she didn't want the smelter to reopen because of the potential health risks to El Paso and neighboring communities.

"We are hoping for their (TCEQ) support, because our health and our future is at risk," she said.

This week, a study released by UTEP's Institute for Policy and Economic Development -- and commissioned by **Asarco** -- indicated that the reopening of **Asarco** would bring hundreds of jobs to El Paso and a \$1.16 billion in regional economic output each year.

Frank Gallardo said that he worked for **Asarco** for nearly 30 years and that he would gladly return to work there. He said the smelter meets the standards on air emissions and, equally important, **Asarco** pays livable wages.

"We need to get back to work," he said.

Cook said **Asarco's** potential economic impact is not worth the possible health risks, which were outlined in the resolution.

"As I mentioned before, prostitution would also bring jobs, and it would bring money to our economy, and we could attract people from all over the

United States and world for that, but there are some things you don't want to do for money," Cook said. "Having **Asarco** polluting our air is one of them."

Segura said he hoped the Texas commission recognized that renewing **Asarco's** air-quality permit would affect more than one Texas community.

"It's not just a local issue. But it is a regional issue that has far-reaching ramifications and impact. It is impacting another state, and it's impacting another nation," Segura said. "This gesture has to speak volumes to the state of Texas."

Murguía said the solidarity displayed by the municipalities on Thursday show that the more than 2 million residents of the three sister cities are speaking as one against the air-quality permit for **Asarco**. He said that one voice shouldn't be ignored.

Elected officials for the three cities also signed a resolution asking the federal governments from the United States and Mexico to provide adequate money to maintain and repair the Rio Grande.

The three government bodies also voted in favor of creating committees for border relations to improve communication among El Paso, Juárez and Sunland Park.

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