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by Steve Taylor

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A groundbreaking ceremony was held Tuesday for the South Pharr Research and Development Center on Dicker Road in south Pharr.

LAS MILPAS, RGV – Amazingly, Las Milpas has a population of around 25,000 and yet does not possess a recreation center or library.

All that is about to change, however, with construction by the City of Pharr of the \$5 million-plus South Pharr Research and Development Center. A groundbreaking ceremony was held Tuesday next to Carmen Anaya Elementary School on Dicker Road in south Pharr. Bishop of Brownsville Daniel Flores was present to consecrate the ground.

Among the speakers at the ceremony was Eduardo 'Eddie' Anaya, a leader with Valley Interfaith in Las Milpas and son of the late Carmen Anaya, a fearless community leader of Las Milpas before and after it was annexed by the City of Pharr in 1987.

"Astonishing, isn't it? Las Milpas has a population of 25,000 and yet we do not have a recreation center or a library. They ignored us for far too long," Anaya told the *Rio Grande Guardian*, after the groundbreaking ceremony had ended.

"All these years, we have been taxed, we have been part of the city. They tell us, you are not Las Milpas any more, you are South Pharr. You know what, this is the first time in 20 years that we feel, as citizens, as a community, that we belong to the city of Pharr, that we are part of the city of Pharr. It is an historic day."

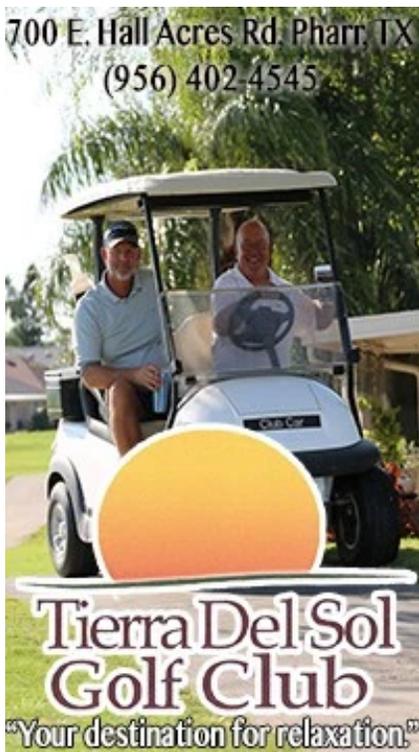
Anaya said the new facility will house 20,000 books and computer labs. He thanked the new city administration, led by Pharr Mayor Ambrosio Hernandez, for listening to the community. And, he said he would like to see educational programs provided at the new center for the

adult population of Las Milpas.

“We hope that by working with PSJA ISD and the City of Pharr we will have ESL and GED classes, and an exhibit hall and recreation center, so that we can run summer programs from our church. We have 900 kids in our classes at St. Frances Cabrini. We are overflowing at the seams. We want to use this as a multi-purpose center, with our churches, our city, our community, as a true educational facility and, quite simply, as a place where kids can go and read a book.”

Las Milpas, Spanish for “The Cornfields,” lies directly south of Pharr, on the south side of a major floodway. It comprised dozens of colonias when it was annexed by the City of Pharr in 1987. City leaders at the time wanted a straight shot to the Rio Grande so they could build a new international bridge. The bridge was built in 1994 and, as the only fully commercial port of entry in Hidalgo County, has been a cash cow for Pharr ever since.

“Ironic, isn’t it, that the biggest financial asset for the City of Pharr is the international bridge and yet to get to the bridge you have to go through Las Milpas, a community that has been forgotten and neglected for all these years?” Anaya said. “In the 20 years we have been annexed there has never been an investment like this, the new library and recreation center. The only investment that came to us was through the Colonia Bill. Thirty million dollars was invested but we had to fight for that. We had to write the legislation. Since then we have paid our taxes for a new water and sewer plant and we have increased the city’s tax base.”



Anaya said the fight to get a recreation center and library has taken years. How it finally came about could be used as a study in political science classes, he said, as an example of democracy in action.

“This new investment did not happen overnight. It has taken years of education, of turning hope into reality, of not giving up, of not thinking we do not matter. We do matter, our vote matters. If you persist and you work, you will affect a change and that is what Valley Interfaith is all about,” Anaya said.

Anaya explained what happened.

“We had house meetings. We identified the needs of our community. We then held accountability sessions with the candidates. We wanted to know why they were running. In the end they embraced our agenda and ran on our agenda. The candidates that were elected embraced our

agenda and voted for it at their very first meeting after taking office. Every single issue that we brought up, based on our house meetings, and in our church, was voted on and approved. I applaud Mayor Hernandez and the City Commission for listening to us and

acting on it.”

Pharr city commissioners, such as Ricardo Medina, acknowledge Valley Interfaith’s involvement in the May 2015 elections made a crucial difference. The group mounted a major Get Out the Vote effort. Turnout in Las Milpas went up and the slate challenging the incumbents won three of the four available slots. But it was close.

Anaya ran through some of the Valley Interfaith agenda items the City of Pharr has worked on since the new administration took office last May.

“We have six or seven colonias that have been paved already. We have street lights, colonias that were previously dark have been lit up. Transportation; we now have Valley Metro buses that take our kids all the way to South Texas College and UTRGV. The VIDA (workforce training) funding was doubled. A bridge that connects two colonias has been built. And now, a \$5 million investment that is going to transform the lives of our community has been made. We made a considerable and tremendous impact.”

Asked if there was anything else he would like to say, Anaya said:

“This is an historic day. This is a collaborative effort between the community, first and foremost, the City, and the business community, working together as a partnership to make things better for our kids and for our elderly. Our community said, this is what we need, you need to do it, or otherwise we will hold you accountable at the next election. They have heard us, loud and clear and they are investing millions of dollars in our community. It should have been done years ago. Now, we can actually say, we belong to the city of Pharr.”

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