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As Funding Dries Up, Colonia Residents Struggle Without Basic Services

Border communities lack electricity, running water and other basic services most Texans take for granted

By Jonathan Hirsch - August 7, 2017

More than 350,000 Texans [live in colonias](#) along the border. These residential areas often lack what most of us take for granted: electricity, drinkable water, paved roads and waste-disposal systems. In El Paso County, several thousand residents are living in these conditions.

“We’re dependent on septic tank systems and private well systems. Some of the wells are contaminated. There’s E. coli, arsenic, and the septic systems: some are failing.” says Manred Lejos, mayor of the village of Vinton, [where most of the residents live in colonias](#). “We’re actually living in third-world conditions 20 minutes from downtown El Paso.”

The communities came about during the 1950s when developers sold the land, for cheap, predominantly to poorer Hispanic Texans. Developers promised that roads and electrical lines would come, but they never did. Starting in the late 1980s, Texas passed a series of bills aimed at helping the colonias, which included grants and loans for water, sewage, and other infrastructure projects. The federal government also stepped in.

But earlier this year, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott [zeroed out the Colonia Initiative Program’s](#) nearly \$860,000 budget. The Trump administration is also signaling that federal funding for colonias may be on the chopping block. Local officials and colonia advocates are wondering who is going to take the financial responsibility for converting colonias into safe, livable neighborhoods.

Catholic priest, Father Ed Lucero, is driving through the windy roads of a subdivision in Socorro, about 15 miles from downtown El Paso, alongside the Rio Grande and the U.S./Mexico border.

“When I was pastor, this was all alfalfa, alfalfa,” he says. “[Now] it’s strip malls. So where the Walmart is, this would have been all agricultural.”

When Lucero arrived in El Paso in the 1980s, he was shocked by the living conditions he found in areas like this. He remembers people using centuries-old wells for non-drinking water, and DIY septic-tank systems. Lucero became part of a faith-based group called the El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization, and worked to raise awareness about how people were living. Over time, he says, sewage began leaking into the groundwater and people started getting sick.

“We had a high rate of hepatitis, you know,” Lucero says. “El Paso County at that time the highest in the country,”

High rate is an understatement. According to a 1988 study by the University of Texas at San Antonio, 90 percent of residents in the town next door to Socorro – San Elizario – tested positive for hepatitis A.

Over the past 30 years, Lucero says government funds have been a critical force in bringing city services to colonias, improving public health and quality of life. These days, this part of Socorro looks like any other rural neighborhood in El Paso County.

Lucero takes a left turn into another subdivision that was once colonia housing.

“And all the streets in this little... It’s not a colonia anymore because people have water,” he says.

In addition to state legislation, the federal government, along with Mexico, created [the Border Environmental Cooperation Commission](#) in 1994. Since then, it has funded various cross-border projects, including helping colonias.

“Here is my road,” Lucero says, pointing out another street in the subdivision. “That’s Rodin and it’s part of my last name.” All the streets in the neighborhood are named after members of the El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization, and after other advocates who fought to bring water and waste service to this area. Now, Lucero says he worries that state and federal cuts will leave the remaining colonia projects unfinished. The Trump administration [has made it clear it wants to cut federal funding](#) to projects like the Border Environmental Cooperation Commission.

“We along the U.S.-Mexico border matter,” says Maria Elena Giner, who manages BECC projects. “We matter. And we need that funding from EPA to address water and wastewater needs. We make a difference. We are not bureaucratic and we do not unwisely spend public tax dollars.”

Some of the communities that would be affected by these cuts want answers. Tornillo is another small town, in west Texas, with a population of about 1,500. Community leaders there wrote letters to the EPA demanding an explanation. EPA officials responded by saying the cuts would

be in line with the president's view that environmental concerns should be under the jurisdiction of state and local government.

For the state's part, Abbott's written explanation for his canceling of colonia funding says state agencies are already available to provide resources to poor Texans. It's not clear, though, if those state agencies can, or would, take on the types of waste and water projects colonia residents say they need. Without state or federal help, it's up to local entities to pick up the slack. But does El Paso County have the resources?

"We do not. And they think the problem is solved. It continues to exist," says El Paso County's Deputy City Attorney Erich Morales.

Morales has worked on colonia issues for the last three decades. He says without federal and state funding, El Paso County likely couldn't eliminate colonias like Vinton, where residents on only three out of the 23 streets in town have access to clean running water.

"That funding was a critical part of being able to move forward and do funding like wastewater treatment plants so that raw sewage is no longer simply being dumped into the groundwater or into the local river into the Rio Grande," he says.

Once the current fiscal year is over this September, the last of the state funding earmarked for colonia projects will be gone. And with the expectation of federal cuts as well, dreams of a colonia-free El Paso may still be very far away.