

Asarco cleanup agency chosen

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EL PASO -- A Los Angeles-based environmental management and strategy firm will oversee the \$52 million cleanup for the Asarco site in El Paso.

Mark Vickery, executive director of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, announced the selection of Project Navigator Ltd. from among 24 contenders.

"This highly respected and experienced firm will work with the TCEQ to advance toward closure of the site," said Vickery. He added that Roberto Puga would represent the firm as the custodial trustee for the cleanup.

Puga, a principal and senior project manager for Project Navigator, was unavailable for comment late Wednesday. He has a bachelor's degree in geophysics from the University of California at Santa Barbara, and has worked on several projects involving federal Superfund sites in Texas and California.

Project Navigator has served national and international clients that include well-known corporations like Chevron, Dow, Halliburton and Boeing. Its company Web site states: "We take pride in blending creativity and practical reality in our planning, problem solving and execution."

State Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, D-El Paso, said Wednesday that he has encouraged Puga to talk to government and business leaders, community activists, Juárez leaders, neighborhood groups and members of the University of Texas at El Paso.

"Our community has a historic opportunity to redevelop one of the key sites in our community, the true Pass of the North," Shapleigh said.

"In other communities, stadiums have been placed on Asarco riverfront properties, and in still others, research parks or other key installations have been placed.

"Due to the proximity to Mexico, the historic nature of Peace Park across the river, and the rail and access to UTEP, this site is very important to El Paso's future."

In a letter, Shapleigh told Puga he also would send him documents about the city and county's plans for a 30,000-seat arena, "which have foundered recently for lack of a site."

El Paso Mayor John Cook said he met with Puga earlier this week.

"He's looking for different ideas for what the community would like to see done with the property, and he toured the site," Cook said. "Eventually, he's probably going to have

town hall meetings to get the community's views. I'm glad we don't have to be concerned about the smelter reopening."

City officials did not have any details on when Project Navigator would start the cleanup or how long it might take. Much of this depends on what the site will be used for and the extent of the cleanup required for that use.

"They need to have a development plan before they begin the cleanup," Cook said. "They have to decide such things as whether to knock down the smokestack and other structures ahead of time. Otherwise, they will end up having to redo some of the work."

A U.S. bankruptcy court had agreed with Asarco's previous proposal to shut down the smelter and place the site in a custodial trust for environmental cleanup. The smelter had been dormant since 1999.

A U.S. district court in Texas issued an order Nov. 13 that confirms Asarco's bankruptcy reorganization plan and environmental settlement.

TCEQ officials said that later in December, Asarco is supposed to place \$52 million in a trust for the environmental remediation of the El Paso site and another Asarco non-operating site in Amarillo.