

Asarco cleanup: Prime real-estate opportunity

El Paso Times Editorial Board

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El Paso must be at its diligent, decision-making best now. The proverbial smoke has cleared and the dirty Asarco smelter is officially going away.

A firm has been chosen to oversee a \$52 million cleanup on what is arguably the most prime real-estate in the city. It's land that held a pollution belcher for most of the past 100 years -- and it's located adjacent to both Downtown, the University of Texas at El Paso and the city of Juárez, Mexico.

We must closely monitor this important cleanup, that has so many environmental concerns and EPA entanglements.

But we must also make decisions on future usage of the land so the cleanup firm can do a project-ready job.

It's going to take years ... and officials aren't sure just how many years.

State Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, D-El Paso, has been the spearhead against Asarco's threat to open after a decade in shutters. He called this a "historic move," a major opportunity for El Paso to do something big at "The true Pass of the North."

There is already talk of multiple uses for the 100-acre smelter site, and more public input is said to be welcome:

- Site of a new arena. That's what citizens in Omaha, Neb., did with their old smelter site along the river.
- Expansion of land-locked UTEP. The site is just down Paisano Drive from the main campus. It could be ideal for UTEP's mission as a Tier-One research institution.
- Infrastructure is already in place for passenger rail from Juárez to El Paso. It would eventually link to Las Cruces and then join New Mexico's Rail Runner Express as a track from here to Santa Fe.
- It could be an expansion of the growing Union Station entertainment district in Downtown.
- It's right at the meeting point of three states -- Texas, New Mexico and Chihuahua.

Let's keep the firm, Project Navigator Ltd., moving contaminated dirt and tearing down the soot-stained structures that are such an eyesore. Keep them "Dotting all the i's," as Shapleigh said.

Let's be ready for our opportunity of a lifetime.