

# Asarco cleanup manager visits site

By Diana Washington Valdez / El Paso Times  
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EL PASO -- The man who will be in charge of the Asarco site cleanup project said Thursday that two of his main challenges will be limited funds and figuring out El Paso's best use of the property.

Roberto Puga, 44, a principal and manager for Project Navigator Ltd. of Los Angeles, said his new role will become official once the Asarco custodial agreement is signed.

"I am just starting to get my hands around the project and have not been given access to the project files," he said. "I am honored to be chosen to do the job for the citizens of El Paso. I saw the Asarco site on Monday, and met with several officials and with the Get the Lead Out organization."

Puga, who has overseen other cleanup projects in Texas, said he will probably work out of the Asarco offices until they are demolished.

Transferring the \$52 million for the trust to a bank account, meeting with more El Pasoans to get opinions, and hiring subcontractors to remove the contamination are among the duties that lie ahead.

"Asarco is a big site and an iconic piece of property," Puga said. "It has a long history of community activism. There is a finite amount of money to work with, and this will require tight fiscal control."

Technically, the trust will have the ultimate responsibility for the environmental cleanup, which could take several years.

"Asarco is out of the picture totally," said Puga, who plans another visit to El Paso next month.

Jim Kelly, chairman of Get the Lead Out, a grass-roots organization that fought against restarting the smelter, said he looks forward to working with Puga and others in the community to develop a future vision for the site.

The 122-year-old smelter in West El Paso, which was used to refine lead and copper, has been dormant since 1999.

"The \$52 million for the trust is absolutely not enough for what needs to be done," Kelly said. "Maybe they can get a superfund designation for the property to qualify for additional money."

He said the Asarco site is on a historic location and his group would not like to see it used for industrial purposes, such as for a brickmaker or as a rail yard.

"We also don't want to see it piecemealed away," he said. "We need something that gives us a return and takes into account its unique Pass of the North location."

The group also wants the trustee to remove the site contamination that threatens the Rio Grande and groundwater.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, which selected Project Navigator for the work, has focused on investigating the extent of arsenic, lead and cadmium contamination at the site.

In recent years, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency led a soil remediation effort in West and South El Paso for residential yards that contained excessive levels of lead and arsenic.

Although the EPA said Asarco was the suspected source of the contamination, the company always maintained that the heavy metals in those yards came from other sources.

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