

Testimony of Bernalillo County Commissioner Debbie O'Malley

to the

Senate Subcommittee on Superfund, Toxics and Environmental Health

July 24, 2013

Good afternoon, Chairman Udall, Ranking Member Crapo and Members of the Committee.

My name is Debbie O'Malley, and I sit on the Bernalillo County Commission, representing the residents of District 1. Bernalillo County is the most heavily populated County in the State of New Mexico. Eighty-two percent of the county's residents reside within the City of Albuquerque.

For the nine years prior to my recent election to the County Commission, I was an Albuquerque City Councilor, also an elected position.

I'm honored to be here today to speak in support of EPA's Brownsfields Program. As others testified, the Brownsfields program has had a profound impact on the quality of life in communities throughout our county. In Bernalillo County, this program has been instrumental in the clean-up of industrial sites and landfills, and the creation of more open space, much-needed regional parks, affordable housing and mixed use developments. All of these projects were in established, and in some cases, historic neighborhoods, and as a result did not contribute to the problems related to urban sprawl.

For example, in 2003, the County partnered with the City of Albuquerque to create a million dollar revolving loan fund that was used to clean-up and remodel an historic hotel, trading post and school library.

I was asked to testify today, however, because of my direct role in one of the most successful neighborhood redevelopment efforts in the State. It's an effort that I helped lead, prior to my becoming an elected official. It involved over 35 acres in the historic heart of Albuquerque.

It's the story of the Sawmill Redevelopment Project--a community driven and community-owned, multi-million dollar, award-winning redevelopment initiative that transformed two contaminated industrial sites into a mixed-use development that includes high quality, permanently affordable single-family, multi-family and senior housing. It's also the story of personal commitment and perseverance by residents of a predominantly Hispanic, historic, low income neighborhood which had experienced decline for decades. Today, it's the story of true and lasting community empowerment.

My involvement in this project began over 20 years ago when I received a flier on my doorstep encouraging residents in our neighborhood to come to an important meeting. My husband and I had bought our first home in the historic Sawmill/Old Town neighborhood—an area where my family had a long history. It was an old adobe (mud brick) house that needed a lot of work, but that was affordable to us at the time. We were busy raising our two daughters and remodeling our small home. Until I received that flier, I had never been to a neighborhood meeting or participated in any civic action.

I went to that meeting and I discovered that a few determined neighbors, led by Max Ramirez, a retired housepainter, were organizing to stop a nearby particle board manufacturing company from polluting our neighborhood. They had discovered that the company had been dumping its industrial wastewater, containing formaldehyde, benzene and other toxic chemicals, into unlined pits. This activity had resulted in a contaminated plume a quarter of a mile long. My neighbors were also concerned about the health effects of toxic emissions that were being released from the plant, particularly at night.

I was shocked to learn about these problems, but because my husband and I had made the commitment to raise our family in the Sawmill neighborhood, I decided I would do my part. Thus began my education in community organizing. Working side-by-side with my neighbors—a small group with few resources— and going to what seemed like countless meetings, we began to see that our actions were having an impact. We were able to pressure the company to address the contaminated groundwater through a clean-up agreement with the State, the first of its kind in New Mexico. We were also successful in getting the City to cite the company for “illegally” emitting toxic particulates at night.

In 1992, things took a dramatic turn, and much to our surprise, 27 acres of industrial land next to the particle board manufacturing plant went up for sale. We heard that the plant was considering acquiring the land and expanding its facility, and we began another organizing effort.

Having no experience in community planning, we found ourselves on a steep learning curve. We familiarized ourselves with such new terms such as Smart Growth, Sustainable Development and Neo-traditional neighborhoods.

Ultimately, we were able to convince the City of Albuquerque to acquire the 27 acres and commit through a contract—the first of its kind in the State—to allow the community to plan and develop this property.

In order to carry out the planning and development, we first formed a community development corporation and later a community land trust. It was important to us that the housing we

developed be affordable for future generations. I was hired as the Executive Director, and our first task was to master plan this site.

The award-winning master plan, which we name Arbolera de Vida (Orchard of Life) was based on neo-traditional neighborhood design: homes with front porches; safe areas for play; community gardens; places that encourage safe, multi-generational interaction.

In early 2000, after removing truckloads of contaminated soil, we began construction of the first phase of "Arbolera de Vida." We did not use the Brownfields program for this initial clean-up. The program was used, however, years later during subsequent phases of the project. In an ironic twist of fate, the Sawmill Community Land Trust was able to purchase the former particle board manufacturing facility. The company had gone out of business and the land was put up for sale. The site, as you can imagine, required extensive environmental remediation. In 2009, the Sawmill Community Land Trust applied for and was awarded \$225 thousand through the State's Brownfields Fund Program for clean-up of the particle board manufacturing company's site.

I have brought photographs with me that illustrate the transformation of this area.

EXPLAIN PHOTOGRAPHS

As you might imagine, millions of dollars in public and private funding have gone into the Sawmill effort over the last 20 years, resulting in hundreds of local construction-related jobs. More important, however, this project has created social and economic wealth in a community that was suffering from disinvestment and neglect.

It was through the efforts of committed and determined residents that this neighborhood was turned around. It's through resources such as those provided by the Brownfields Program that these projects become a reality.

I would like to thank Senator Tom Udall for inviting me to speak before this committee today.

I am happy to answer any questions.