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By: Stephanie Jara and Steve Taylor

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Las Milpas, a case study in how civic engagement can improve a community



"The only place for our youth to gather was the local Walmart. It is pretty incredible, right?" said Eddie Anaya, a leader with Valley Interfaith.

Anaya explained that the closest public library to Las Milpas, a community that started out as a colonia south of Pharr, was on the north side of town, across the floodway. "That is a long way away for the families of Las Milpas to travel. Many could not get to the library in north Pharr. It was particularly hard for those who cannot afford the Internet, who do not own a computer."

Things are about to change, however. Next month, a new library and resource center will open in Las Milpas, the latest improvement that has come about,

Pharr Mayor Ambrosio Hernandez said, because of grassroots activism and a new city administration that has delivered on its campaign promises.

"All of Las Milpas is transformed, thanks in large part to Valley Interfaith. This group played a critical role in identifying the improvements the City of Pharr had to make, and I am sure they have done it throughout the Rio Grande Valley," Hernandez said.

Anaya said the unveiling of the new library will be an historic day for Las Milpas. "It will be the culmination of ten, maybe 15 years of struggle, it has not come overnight. It will be of value for generations to come. We are elated," Anaya said.

Hernandez agreed that January 9, 2018, the day the new library is slated to open, will be an historic day for Pharr.



Pharr Mayor Ambrosio Hernandez

"The citizens of south Pharr, or Las Milpas, had been promised a library by different administrations but for different reasons it had not come to fruition. The number one excuse was there were insufficient resources. When we ran for office, we did an audit and we knew there was enough revenue to get the library and other projects done. We just had to reallocate resources and use them in a thriftier manner," Hernandez said.

"Once we heard from the public, via Valley Interfaith, and kudos to them for that, we realized that we did need that type of infrastructure in play on Dicker Road, to serve this population. It will be a wonderful resource, a shelter as well. It will help the children in so many ways, including recreation, with a basketball court among the features. We plan to provide some after school hour educational programs as well. It is a much-needed facility that the people of

Pharr deserve, and we are happy to have been available to help them get it done.”



Jones Box Park

Hernandez, Anaya, and other community leaders gave interviews to the *Rio Grande Guardian* about the “transformation” that has taken place in Las Milpas during a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new, improved, Jones Box Park.

“We are calling it our new park, even though it has been in existence for some time,” said Janie Gomez, a parent volunteer for the last eight years at nearby Carmen Anaya Elementary School. “The park has been transformed. It is like night and day. The walking trail is awesome. There is going to be a lot more exercising and walking around.”

Joe Garza, principal at Carmen Anaya Elementary School, agreed.

"We are very excited because they are doing some renovations and some new additions to our park and this is a park our kid use, probably five or six times a year because we are just across the street," Garza said.

Asked what the park was like before, Garza said: "What we had before were some slightly developed walking trails, not as fully developed as they are now. We had very few trees. Now, I think they mentioned, they have 78 trees planted. We are excited about that. The improvements to the walking trails are great. We had limited access to restrooms, and now they have built new facilities. We are excited about the new basketball court. So many new additions to the park."

Garza said he was pleased to see a number of Las Milpas parents at the ribbon-cutting ceremony. "They are excited about the new park. We are calling it the new park even though it has existed for quite some time. It has got a new face now."

Anaya said local residents should be proud of what they achieved by campaigning for an improved park.

"The City of Pharr has invested over \$600,000 so people can walk on new walking trails. They have put in 78 new trees, basketball courts, and, crucially, a new bridge that connects Las Milpas, a whole colonia, to the park. It has literally transformed the way we live, our health, our civic pride."

Mayor Hernandez said renovating Jones Box Park was top priority when he took office.

"Today we are completing one of our big goals. There was very little attention given to the park before. Now, there is new equipment, and a robust

maintenance program in play. We have hired more personnel to fulfill all the requirements at our parks,” Hernandez said.

“When we took office, we wanted to expand the park and make sure the people of south Pharr had more area to walk around and enjoy the health of nature it provides. It gives the children somewhere to play and the families to congregate. We have installed new restrooms, new basketball courts. We have more ‘green’ areas, and have planted 78 new trees. We will probably double that.”

Hernandez said the plan is to expand the western end of the park to include a splash park for the kids, possibly in 2018.

“This was one of many endeavors we wanted to achieve when we took office. We wanted to complete what we said we were going to do. We did not say this just to get elected. I hope the citizens of Pharr enjoy the amenities they deserve. We are looking to expand an additional 200 acres throughout Pharr for more parks, for more quality of life.”

Democracy in Action

Las Milpas has always had a different feel to it than north Pharr, with far less infrastructure provided. Colonia residents had to rally in Austin to get the Legislature to provide water and wastewater services, as well as street paving. Under the direction of then-Pharr Mayor Fidencio Barrera, it annexed by Pharr in the 1970’s so city leaders could get to the Rio Grande. Working with then-U.S. Sen. Phil Gram and then-General Services Administration regional director Hollis Rutledge, Barrera worked to get a presidential permit for an international bridge. The only way for Pharr to benefit from an international bridge was drive a wedge through Las Milpas. Carmen Anaya was the leader of Las Milpas at the time and she opposed annexation. The local elementary school is named for the legendary Valley Interfaith activist. Attorney Eddie Anaya is her son.

In interviews, community leaders explained how the civic activism taught them by the late Carmen Anaya eventually paid dividends. They said the investment in infrastructure did not come overnight. They said they would go to city hall, on the north side of Pharr, in large groups to demand more services but were always rebuffed. The administration in place before Hernandez took over as mayor would tell them, the investment in your community will take place, but only when we have built up commercial activity around the international bridge. Such activity would bring in the revenues required to invest in Las Milpas, they were told.

"Years back, when we went with 40 or 50 people and packed the city commission, Carmen Lopez, other leaders, and our youth, spoke before the commission," Anaya said. "Carmen was reminded she had three minutes to speak. When she was speaking, very eloquently in Spanish, she was interrupted by the previous mayor and told, can you speak English. If not, you need to sit down. That, in itself, gave so much anger to the community. We knew there was only one thing we could do and that was educate our voters and go out and vote."

The education of voters came through house meetings and accountability sessions, Anaya explained.

"The community came together and identified issues that mattered to the families, and particularly to the youth. We told the elected officials, we need parks, a library, a place to gather. At a key accountability session, two of city commissioners did not show up. One of them lost by 12 votes, the other by 40," Anaya said, referring back to the 2015 city council election campaign.

"There were over 350 people packed in our church hall for that accountability session and we educated the candidates as to the needs of our community. By the time they left the accountability session, it was Valley Interfaith's agenda that was on top and this is what the winning slate of candidates began working for. They won their election and at the first city commission they had, all the

issues on Valley Interfaith's agenda, and the community's agenda, including the library and this park, was approved. Two, three years later these are the results," Anaya said proudly.

Anaya said that approximately two thirds of the Las Milpas colonia has been repaved, with new street lighting installed.

"None of this happened overnight. We have been working for years to transform the community. We have transformed it by listening, by researching, by teaching, by educating ourselves. We made sure there was an educated vote," Anaya said.

"We took our civic responsibilities seriously. Basically, having democracy work as it should be. Educating our politicians, telling them what is important. Then, making sure they implement the agenda we, Valley Interfaith and the community, developed. It is civic engagement at its finest."

Anaya said without the input of the community none of the improvements to Las Milpas would have happened.

"We have always had hope. Without the hope we would have nothing. We basically told the elected officials, you are our servants, we elect you and we have the obligation to tell you the needs of our community. This is what we have done. The new mayor, the new city commission, they listened to us, they made sure that the community was listened to. Not only that, they invested money in the needs of the community. Working together, Las Milpas is now a vibrant new community that is enjoying a new standard of living."

Anaya added: "The best part about this is we developed an educated vote. We understand more than one third of the votes are from this community. But it is not just a vote, it is an educated vote. It is their voice that needs to be heard, whether they speak English or whether they don't. It does not matter. They are

citizens, they are taxpayers. They hold the politicians accountable. They should be heard. It is what matters in this community.”

Mayor’s Perspective

Mayor Hernandez gave his interpretation of democracy in action in Las Milpas.

“During the 2015 elections, we

met in one of the churches with all candidates that were

running. Certain concerns were

brought to our attention as candidates. The team I was working with were committed to their needs. We knew they were requesting change on behalf of the public. We welcome any and all clergy, all faiths to city hall. We are here to serve everybody. There is no question Valley Interfaith played a critical role in the livelihood and discussions, and pointing out any and all deficiencies. We are proud to have them as a partner.”



Valley Interfaith members discuss their agenda for Las Milpas at Pharr City Hall in September, 2014. Eddie Anaya is pictured left. (Photo: RGG/Steve Taylor)

Hernandez said that while Las Milpas may have been neglected in the past, it was now thriving with more businesses starting up along the Cage Boulevard corridor. He pointed out that when he first ran for office in 2015, south Pharr, or Las Milpas, had a population of over 30,000, out of a total city population of 78,000.

“I am sure with the new census it will be split almost half, half north of the floodway, half south. In my vision, there is only one Pharr. Pharr is Pharr. At the end of the day, their taxpayer money is just as important as my taxpayer money. We will invest in the most needed areas first and then move forward, that way the entire city rises together,” Hernandez said.

"They (Las Milpas) were in the most need so they got the most revenue, to help things move along with the infrastructure, streets, job opportunities, moving businesses here, expanding STC into the southern part of Pharr. Now, we also have a nursing college on the north side of Pharr and more businesses coming in. Our vision is to encompass the entire city."

Garza, the Carmen Anaya Elementary School principal, said he would like to thank the city council for the improvements that have been made in the community.

"We would like to thank the City of Pharr. We would like to show our appreciation. The mayor is going to be reading to our kids. We will show him our appreciation for doing this for our community," Garza said.

"We must also thank Valley Interfaith for playing an integral role. I know Mr. Anaya and his group has been coming in the school. Together with our parents, we had a voice. Through them we had a voice. The City heard what we needed, and we are excited about that."

Gomez, the parent volunteer at Carmen Anaya Elementary School, agreed that the city council and Valley Interfaith deserve praise.

"They have played a big role in all that we are getting now. I have been in parent meetings with Mr. Eddie Anaya. We are excited about our new research center coming up. It is amazing how our community is growing," she said.

Editor's Note: The main image accompanying the above story shows a mural depicting old Pharr. Above the mural is the new footbridge that connects the Las Milpas colonia to Jones Box Park, in south Pharr.