

Residential Joy
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By Kirsten Crow

Magdalena Martinez smiled through her tears as she turned the earth of Colonia Hermosa with a golden-spaded shovel, marking the beginning of the end of the 15-year battle she fought – and won – to bring water and sewer services to her neighborhood.

Martinez was flanked by city officials and her fellow residents Friday morning as they broke ground for the project intended to bring the first water and sewer services to the inner-city neighborhood that residents have long lobbied for.

Soon, water will be a convenience, instead of a commodity, on the 400 block of Milmo Avenue bordering Chacon Creek.

About 15 families living in the vicinity have not had ready access to the utilities for nearly 15 years, despite its location within Laredo's city limits and commerce burgeoning across the arroyo.

All the homeowners have the same story: the developer of the land promised the utilities would be installed by the city within three months, but they never came.

For years, city officials told the residents it was developer's responsibility, while the developer continued to insist the city was accountable. In the meantime, residents rented portable bathrooms and bought their water from a coin-operated station on Highway 359.

In August 2005, the city installed a single faucet to serve the entire community. Residents manufactured makeshift waterlines by connecting hoses from the faucet to large tanks. However, it was not potable, they said, and used only for bathing and washing dishes.

During the sometimes bittersweet groundbreaking ceremony, city officials and residents alike spoke to the crowd about the courses of action taken — which were occasionally painful — to bring improvements to the community.

Acting City Manager Cynthia Collazo alternated between English and Spanish when addressing the crowd; many of Colonia Hermosa's residents are primarily Spanish speakers.

She described the process that began in 1998 to bring the lines to the residents — the plans, the complications and the dedication of city department heads and employees.

Collazo said even after the sewer and water connections are completed, the city is not finished: They will begin street improvements instead.

The water and sanitary improvements project is estimated to cost \$246,000, and will be funded with 1997 and 2003 bond monies, while the street improvements will likely be paid for with the Community Development Block Grant. Phase 1 of the project could be complete as early as June 2007.

Councilman Michael Landeck, who represents the district, said he was pleased that a solution was reached while he was in office. He recognized the neighborhood, saying the people are “fighting very hard for their very existence: and thanks “the residents who kept reminding me the promise was made and it needs to be fulfilled.”

Julian Reyna, who has lived in the colonia for 11 years, has waited many years for this moment. The greatest benefit, he said, was that the water from the city would be potable. Rosa Herrera said her faith in the system was rooted in the taxes she paid.

“I’ve been here for 10 years already, but I never lost faith,” she said. “That was the main thing – as long as we were getting charged taxes, we knew there would be a time we would get the services.”

Although she acknowledged it was a happy day, Herrera said residents were forced to fight for far too long for basic necessities.

Martinez, who is generally named as the face of the movement, said the struggle was a worthy one, and credited God and city officials with bringing her dream to fruition.

During the ceremony, Martinez choked back tears as she described her frustration several years ago, when she was told the utilities could not — or would not — happen.

After the ceremony, she walked down the small hill from her home to the groundbreaking site, two cakes in hand.

She smiled as she served the cakes to her neighbors, guests and city leaders.

In blue icing, one read “Col Hermosa” and the other, appropriately, “Celebrate 2006.”