



MESILLA VALLEY PRESERVATION, INC.

P.O. Box 1780 • Mesilla, New Mexico 88046 • Phone: 575.526.1230
E-Mail: mvpres@gmail.com Web: mvpres.org

April 8, 2015

The Honorable Mayor Leeser, esteemed El Paso City Council Representatives, and City Manager Gonzalez;

I am writing as a lifelong neighbor from Las Cruces and a frequent visitor to your city. I want to take this opportunity to express my alarm and deep concern for the large-scale demolitions of El Paso's unique historic downtown architecture that have taken place over the last several years. At the same time, I want to strongly encourage you to embrace the historic district survey process that I understand may soon be under way in downtown El Paso. I remain convinced that a good architectural survey along with careful governance can respect property rights along with the history, patrimony, and economic potential of El Paso.

As founder and President of Mesilla Valley Preservation, Inc., with many years of practical preservation experience, I am well aware of the challenges you face, as well as the opportunities before you. Recent visits to downtown El Paso have reminded me what a unique and valuable architectural treasure trove you have in the form of El Paso's built environment. It would be hard to overstate the importance and uniqueness of El Paso's historic architecture. I am not alone in seeing this potential, and people like Paul Foster, Lane Gaddy, and Roger Brown have all stepped forward to show the way by rehabilitating important downtown historic structures. Change is inevitable and desirable in a healthy growing city, but how you handle and direct that change can make all the difference to your future prosperity and quality of life.

I was stunned to see the recent demolition of two irreplaceable Trost & Trost designed buildings (the Union Bank and Trust Building and the Muir Building) as well as the wanton destruction (in the dark of night) of an entire city block containing still older historic buildings on San Antonio Avenue. It was especially disappointing to learn that some of these demolitions were approved administratively, with no apparent review of their merits or the impact to the neighborhood—and no viable plan from developers for what would replace these buildings. Without clear and definite plans, these were purely speculative demolitions, and El Paso is poorer for having allowed them to occur.

Again, you don't represent me, but many in Las Cruces have noted the frequent El Paso demolitions with sadness. In fact, our experience in Las Cruces may be helpful to you. A similar rash of demolitions took place in our downtown during Urban Renewal in the 1960s and 1970s. Like all of your recent demolitions, most of the demolition sites in Las Cruces remain vacant lots, 45 years later. Las Cruces is still reeling from the loss of much of the architecture that gave it a unique identity, and is still struggling to revitalize its downtown as a result, after multiple false starts. These demolitions and the era of Urban Renewal are not viewed proudly by

our residents today. The politicians who allowed them are seen by many as short-sighted pariahs who sold out Las Cruces' future, and the economic losses from not having a thriving downtown for the last several decades are incalculable. Fortunately, Las Cruces today is starting to capitalize on its history and there are multiple sensitive rehabilitation projects under way.

I have recently read of efforts to conduct an architectural survey of Downtown El Paso. This is *exactly* the right next step, and it is very encouraging to learn that you may embark on a study of this magnitude. It is essential to first understand what you have, before it is simply too late. Yes, respecting the rights of property owners is fundamental and essential, but so is the right of a community and its people to understand and celebrate their own unique sense of place and capitalize on their unique history. Many communities have successfully focused on the economic value of having a national historic district—both as a driver for tourism and interest, and as a draw to bring vibrant businesses downtown into the heart of the community.

You have an incredible opportunity to foster investment and cultivate architectural and heritage tourism downtown, but it must be handled carefully. That opportunity fades with each demolition you authorize, and with it, El Paso's unique character and sense of place fades as well. I strongly encourage you to halt these large-scale demolitions before they go any further, and evaluate other solutions. Embrace this opportunity to understand and tell El Paso's unique story by researching and surveying the architecture that survives encouraging sensitive development that preserves historic architecture—with its potential to create sustainable jobs and revenue for El Pasoans for years to come. Let this be your legacy rather than the current trend toward more vacant lots.

Sincerely yours,



Eric Liefeld
President, Mesilla Valley Preservation, Inc.

CC:

Col. Cary Westin, Managing Director, Economic and International Development Dept., City of El Paso
Jessica Herrera, Redevelopment Manager, City of El Paso
Providencia Velazquez, Historic Preservation Officer, City of El Paso
Bernie Sargent, Chair, El Paso County Historical Commission
Max Grossman, Vice-Chair, El Paso County Historical Commission
Mark Wolfe, Executive Director, Texas Historical Commission
Evan Thompson, Executive Director, Preservation Texas
Malissa Arras, President, Texas Trost Society