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Panama City Coastal Thoroughfare Threatens World Heritage Site

by Sean Mattson

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A World Heritage Site is typically something authorities tend to value. It is not clear if that is the case in Panama. Panama City's historic Casco Antiguo district risks removal from the esteemed UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) heritage list as President Ricardo Martinelli presses forward with an expensive and highly controversial extension of the city's bay-front thoroughfare.

The third phase of the Cinta Costera, to cost a reported US\$777 million, is set to wrap around Panama City's Casco Antiguo peninsula, which was settled more than three centuries ago and is one of the last historic vestiges of a booming city that is quickly being overrun by skyscrapers.

UNESCO, which oversees heritage-site designations, has warned that Casco Antiguo could be removed from the list if the Cinta Costera proceeds. Martinelli does not seem to mind. "That's their problem," reported Martinelli saying when asked for his thoughts about whether UNESCO will remain opposed to the thoroughfare extension, which is likely if it proceeds as planned.

In yet another case pitting Martinelli's hurricane-force will against less-powerful opposition, there seems little stopping the project designed to connect the city's bay-front thoroughfare with the Puente de las Americas, a bridge over the Panama Canal.

The government casts the Costera's expansion as a much-needed partial solution to the city's chronic gridlock—and a way to boost the living standard of the working-class neighborhoods that border on the project. But it appears the broader project includes a roughly 500-acre high-end real estate and marina development to be built over the bay.

"The high-rise district on the edge of the entrance to the Panama Canal called "Nuevo Amador"...leads us to believe that the motivations for building the highway are not as straightforward as the government has been promoting to the general public and UNESCO," said the Asociación de Vecinos y Amigos del Casco Antiguo, a neighborhood association opposed to the development.

Nuevo Amador

The details of the Nuevo Amador development, posted in an anonymous but professionally made video on YouTube, came to light in mid-June when broadcast on Telemetro during an interview with Carlos Ho, the special-projects director for the Ministerio de Obras Públicas. Ho initially didn't debate the contents of the video but the government later distanced itself from the production.

The video shows the Casco Antiguo peninsula being surrounded by a park—and at least six lanes of traffic. The project proposal shows the fill project widening after rounding the small outcrop, filling in some 2 million square meters of bay area for the construction of high-end residential and commercial areas, parks, a beach and marina. Part of the project includes an abandoned bay-fill

project jutting out of the Amador Causeway that was seized by the government soon after Martinelli took office.

The scenic causeway was built with material used from the construction of the Panama Canal to act as a breakwater at the canal's Pacific entrance. And it is being argued that its relatively isolated uniqueness would be greatly altered by the proposed development.

The detailed—but unofficial—proposal would permanently alter the unique marine environment of Casco Antiguo, which was a famed defensive site in Panama's independence from Colombia in 1903 and is also called Casco Viejo. For residents of the working-class neighborhoods further along the extended Costera, their view of the bay would be blocked by new buildings and residents would be distanced from those by lanes of traffic and a park.

followed the Telemetro report with industry experts quoted as saying that producing such a video would cost at least US\$100,000. The report included a long stream of surprise reactions to the project.

Sources told that the historical importance of Casco Antiguo would be lost and that residents of El Chorrillo—a troubled working-class sector that would lose its oceanfront view to the sight of skyscrapers—were being tricked into supporting the project, which is being pitched as part of government efforts to spruce up the decaying old district.

The new residential project perhaps explains why the government is pushing so hard for an outlandishly expensive—and, critics say, marginally useful—infrastructure project, especially with dozens of city bottlenecks needing arguably much cheaper and more urgent upgrades.

"Now it's all clear," wrote 's Hoy por Hoy opinion column on the front page the day after the video came to light. "What's at stake is a huge real estate development."

UNESCO ignored

Last year UNESCO asked Panama to stop the Cinta Costera's recently completed second phase but says the request was ignored. The second phase extended the bay-front Cinta Costera a short distance into Casco Antiguo, bypassing the crumbling and seedy neighborhood of Terraplén, which visitors formerly had to traverse to enter Casco Antiguo from downtown.

The project certainly spruced up the neighborhood's appearance and contributed to the ongoing gentrification of the broader Casco Antiguo district, likely boosting the value of the properties with a spiffy park and road buffering their view of the bay.

But UNESCO disagreed with the project and reported it had not received any submissions that it had requested from the government regarding the project.

"Phase 2 has strongly modified the traditional water front of the Terraplén losing the opportunity to rehabilitate the picturesque maritime character of the area," UNESCO wrote in an April report on the issue. "Although this Phase 2 is positive in terms of the public hygiene of the area, it presents a rather unnecessary and radical transformation of the waterfront."

UNESCO was on the verge of placing Casco Antiguo on its List of World Heritage in Danger because of the continued threats. A government commission sent to UNESCO's Paris headquarters in June reportedly obtained a stay of that move, and government ministers and UNESCO officials

were reported as saying the Cinta Costera's third phase would be delayed while UNESCO studied the plans.

"The Cinta Costera Project Phase 3 should be immediately suspended and technical information on proposed alternatives submitted to the World Heritage Centre for further analysis and to start the consultative process," UNESCO wrote in its April report. "If the Cinta Costera Project Phase 3 is constructed, the process of commencing the property's delisting from the World Heritage List is envisaged."

UNESCO called for a study of alternatives and offered a "highly specialized expert on these matters" to consult on the project. But it's not clear if the project has been stalled for six months as was reported after the Panamanian government officials' trip to Paris.

"[The project] will not start until having all the studies and complying with the parameters so UNESCO is satisfied," Public Works Minister Federico Suárez said, according to .

Days later, Martinelli said that was not the case. He started blaming media and special interests for confusing the public—a similar tactic employed by the government during a recently botched mine-sector reform that led to protests ([NotiCen, Sept. 30, 2010](#)).

"We have to act quickly, there is no pause," Martinelli said, reported . "This was false information that a media outlet [published] that has personal interests in this."

"What was agreed to is that we are going to be in close collaboration and coordination [with UNESCO], but the order to commence has been given and this is going to start as soon as possible," he said in reference to the project. reported Martinelli as saying "four people and two companies control Casco Viejo."

Part of the controversy behind the project is that it was originally supposed to bypass the Casco area via a tunnel. Reportedly, that was the condition of the project won by Brazilian engineering firm Odebrecht, which has won a considerable number of projects in Panama recently, including the major stake in a US\$1.8 billion subway project.

A tunnel would perhaps spare Casco but it could also be a risk to the old buildings above it before resurfacing in El Chorrillo. UNESCO reportedly has received plans only on the tunnel version of the project, which it also questions. But a tunnel is perhaps the least intrusive way of connecting the thoroughfare to the Puente de las Americas.

Now the Martinelli government says the tunnel plan has been scrapped—it costs US\$200 million more than building the Costera around Casco Antiguo, Martinelli says. Last week it was reported that the government was considering a referendum on how to move forward, but the only two options weighed are a view-spoiling traffic bridge that would bypass Casco Antiguo over the bay or the current plan to engulf the historic district with a park and traffic.

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