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Environmental Briefs: Green Zocalo, Water Conservation, Toxic Waste Dumping

by LADB Staff

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Mexico City to add green spaces to Zocalo

In late July, Mayor Cuauhtemoc Cardenas' administration launched an ambitious project to add green spaces to Mexico City's huge central square, the Zocalo. Under the plan, trees, walkways, and benches would be transplanted to cover one-fourth of the square, which spans 80,000 sq m. The administration moved ahead with the project following a referendum in July in which voters overwhelmingly supported beautifying the Zocalo. The referendum was only the first step in the project.

The Cardenas administration must now find private engineering, construction, and landscaping companies willing to donate their services and materials. "The project will cost very little to taxpayers in the capital," said Alejandro Encinas, Mexico City's environmental secretary. "We will open bids to companies that have already expressed interest in the proposal." Encinas said the winning bidder will be selected by December.

The Zocalo was constructed as a park in 1866. In 1958, then mayor Ernesto Uruchurtu converted the park into an open plaza to emphasize the surrounding buildings, the Metropolitan Cathedral, the Presidential Palace, and City Hall.

Some voters and civic organizations have voiced concerns that remodeling the Zocalo could prevent its being used for demonstrations and political rallies. As many as 30 groups use the Zocalo daily to present their points of view to the public and to the government. But Encinas pointed out that the remodeling would involve only 20,000 sq m, leaving ample open space for groups to organize demonstrations.

Still, the proposal is opposed by some environmental organizations. Regina Barba, president of the Union de Grupos Ambientalistas, questioned the Cardenas administration's priorities in promoting the Zocalo remodeling instead of other areas of the city. "There are hundreds of neighborhoods in our city that lack parks," said Barba. "These neighborhoods do not even have basic services like running water, sewers, lights, and security."

Water commission seeks to promote conservation

The Comision Nacional del Agua (CNA) has proposed a new usage policy designed to promote water conservation and penalize polluters. A CNA report published in early August said the government must take emergency steps because many communities in Mexico could face water shortages within 10 years.

The CNA would not mention specific cities but said the problem appears more severe in northern areas, which have suffered years of drought. "We are in a rapidly changing environment," said Luis Robledo Cabello, CNA director of special projects. "As we face an increasingly negative water balance, we must find ways to distribute our existing resources more equitably." Under the CNA plan, which will be implemented over the next three years, the agency has begun to work with municipalities and state governments to establish water tariffs based on actual consumption. All water subsidies would be eliminated by 2000. "Those who consume more will pay more," said Robledo. The CNA plan also proposes cutting off water for consumers who fail to pay their bill. "We will treat water in much the same way as telephone service and electricity," said Robledo.

Robledo said the higher fees are intended to reduce water waste, estimated at 50% in some larger cities. In Mexico City, for example, per capita water usage is 200 liters per day, 20 liters higher than levels considered essential for the city. Roughly 67% of the water consumed in the Mexico City area is for residential usage, 17% for industrial purposes, and 16% for schools, hospitals, and offices, according to a recent study by the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM).

The UNAM study recommended that authorities in Mexico City and surrounding communities take more steps to increase water supplies for the city, such as constructing more facilities to capture rainwater, increase water-treatment plants, and provide incentives for residents to save water.

Study reveals widespread illegal disposal of toxic waste

A study commissioned by the Mexico City legislature (Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal, ALDF) shows that more than 5.6 million metric tons of toxic and radioactive waste are dumped illegally each year in Mexico City and surrounding states. The study, conducted by UNAM, said these toxic wastes are frequently placed in clandestine dumps and in lakes, waterways, and on hillsides.

Lucero Marquez Franco, a member of the ALDF's environmental commission, said the wastes are destroying ecological reserves, contaminating the city's aquifer and threatening the health of millions of area residents. Marquez, who represents the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) in the ALDF, has been leading an investigation on the effects of a nuclear-waste dump in Maquixco in Mexico state. Marquez said residents in the communities of San Juan Teacalco, Santa Maria Maquixco, Teopancala, and San Cristobal have experienced health problems that can only be attributed to exposure to radioactive materials. She cited a high rate of skin, liver, and stomach cancer since the dump was installed in the 1970s.

Marquez accused federal authorities, particularly the Secretaria del Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales y Pesca (SEMARNAP), of failing to give the problem proper attention. The PRD legislator urged the government to investigate whether enriched uranium produced by the now-defunct company Uramex was deposited at the Maquixco dump. If so, she said, the residues could make their way into underground water supplies, threatening the health of residents of Mexico, Puebla, Queretaro, and Hidalgo states and Mexico City. (Sources: La Jornada, The News, 07/27/98; Novedades, 07/28/98; The New York Times, 08/25/98; El Economista, 08/05/98; Excelsior, 08/07/98 08/08/98, 08/10/98)

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