

UNESCO World Heritage Site Threatened by Coastal Highway Project

The government of Panama and is moving ahead quickly with a controversial coastal highway project that would cause its 338 year old historic district to lose its UNESCO World Heritage Site designation, destroy sensitive environmental areas. A group of fifteen Panamanian and international organizations have joined together in fighting the project, lead by Fundacion Calicanto.

Fundacion Calicanto is a non-profit foundation dedicated to the protection of the historical and human heritage of Casco Antiguo. The foundation, together with fifteen civic groups that make up the *Panama Pro Patrimonio Historico* (Panama for Historical Heritage or PPPH) alliance, are mounting a defense of the historic district of Casco Antiguo against an imminent threat to the district by a highly-over budgeted and under studied seaside highway that UNESCO has declared a threat to the district and its World Heritage Site status.

Background

The specific threat is a highway project (known locally as “Cinta Costera Phase 3”) being promoted by the Government of Panama that would break numerous Panamanian laws, cause one of the oldest cities in the Americas to be removed from UNESCO’s World Heritage list, destroy the only remaining beaches in Panama City and cause irreparable damage to an important sector of Panama’s tourism industry. The +\$770 million project, which was originally presented to the public and awarded to the contractor (Odebrecht) as a tunnel that would not affect the World Heritage Site was abruptly and illegally changed to a seaside landfill or bridge by Panamanian President Ricardo Martinelli despite repeated warnings by UNESCO regarding the dangers of a seaside highway when other options are available.

“Either seaside option, landfill or bridge, would permanently damage the character of the Site, and would lead to its being removed from the World Heritage List” says Pitu Jaen, the Executive Director of the Association of Neighbors and Friends of Casco Antiguo. “Casco Antiguo’s wall served since 1673 as protection, icon and birthplace of the Republic of Panama. To detach the wall from the ocean or modify its surroundings would fundamentally alter the context of the Site.”

In a draft decision published by UNESCO, the technical advisory body stated that “The viaduct project will irreversibly damage the Outstanding Universal Value, authenticity and integrity of the property” and “urges the State Party to halt work immediately on the Cinta Costera III project, and to reverse the work already carried out.” (<http://whc.unesco.org/archive/2012/whc12-36com-7BAdd-en.pdf>).

A video that was leaked by an unknown source (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLRxC iptkU>) shows a highly developed computer model of a 494 acre high rise district on the edge of the entrance to the Panama Canal called “Nuevo Amador”, which substantiated long-held suspicions that the motivations for building the highway are not purely related to improving traffic flow as the government has been promoting to the general public and UNESCO. The government originally denied involvement in the creation of the video then recanted after television footage showed President Ricardo Martinelli holding images taken directly from the video.

Current Status of Highway Project

The contractor, Odebrecht, has begun preliminary work on the highway, which work has not yet penetrated the boundary of the historic district. The preliminary work is necessary as part of the original plan to build a tunnel under the historic district, which plan is not opposed by PPPH. It is not clear how many months it will take Odebrecht to complete the preliminary work and begin construction within the historic district limits, but PPPH estimates that it could be as soon as August 2012.

Defense of World Heritage Site

The goal of PPPH is to cause the government of Panama to revert to the original tunnel plan or drop the highway altogether. To date, the defense of the World Heritage Site has included, among other things, public protests, legal challenges, mass email, radio and social media campaigns. PPPH intends to increase the intensity of these activities and add additional activities, including calls for legal actions in the United States against the contractor, investigations by the United States government of potential violations of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act related to the project and public pressure on US and international governments to ban Odebrecht from bidding on public works.

The Groups Opposing the Degradation of Casco Antiguo

The following civic groups have made public statements against the project:

- Association of Neighbors and Friends of Casco Antiguo (Asociación de Vecinos y Amigos del Casco Antiguo),
- Foundation Calicanto (Fundación Calicanto)
- Pro-City Alliance (Alianza Pro Ciudad)
- Blue Almanac (Almanaque Azul)
- Sustainable Panama Foundation (Fundación Panamá Sostenible)
- The Belisario Porras Foundation (Fundación Belisario Porras)
- Foundation for Development of Civil Liberties (Fundación para el Desarrollo de la Libertad Ciudadana)
- Center for Family Studies and Training (Centro de Estudio y Capacitación Familiar)
- Panamanian Association of Constitutional Rights (Asociación Panameña de Derecho Constitucional)
- Federation of [Panama Canal Zone] Reverted Areas (Federación de Comunidades Revertidas.
- The Collective [Arts] (El Colectivo)

About Casco Antiguo

Originally built and settled in 1671 after the destruction of the first Pacific settlement by Captain Henry Morgan, Casco Antiguo (also known as Casco Viejo & San Felipe) was constructed as a walled city on a peninsula to protect its settlers against future pirate attacks and provide a better harbour for trade. It is the historic district out of which modern Panama City grew and is the oldest European settlement on the Pacific Ocean.

What makes 'Casco' (as the residents call it) unique is the way the neighborhood illustrates the history of international trade in the Americas, with Spanish, French, Caribbean, American and Chinese influences evident in the buildings as well as the inhabitants. The eclectic collection of colonial, neo-classical, Art Deco and improvised architecture, according to UNESCO, "lends a special quality that other colonial districts in Latin America lack."

The district was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1997 after years of decay as Panamanians of means moved to the suburbs. With the declaration came sporadic public investment, but UNESCO has been critical of the lack of investment, planning and enforcement by successive administrations. Despite the limited public involvement, the district has emerged as one of the most culturally vibrant in Panama, with some of the city's best restaurants, galleries and boutique hotels.

Additional References:

- UNESCO World Heritage Center Declaration: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/790>
- Official site of the resistance (Spanish) www.orgullo.com.pa

- <http://mensual.prensa.com/mensual/contenido/2011/06/14/hoy/panorama/2630749.asp>
- Panama's President: Trying on a Strongman Role? Tim Rogers Saturday, Oct. 23, 2010
<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2026938,00.html>.
- "Construction Boom is Built on Drug Money" By Andrew Beatty, Reuters, Dec 31, 2007
<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2007/12/31/uk-panama-skyscrapers-idUKN2053334120071231>

Articles About Casco Viejo:

- "A Cultural Cornerstone", Danielle Pergament, The New York Times- September 14, 2008
- "In Panama City's old quarter, a rebirth takes place", Indira A.R. Lakshmanan, Boston Globe, January 22, 2007
- "Is Panama City The Next South Beach?" Ceci Connolly, The Washington Post, February 18, 2007
- "36 Hours in Panama City", Freda Moon, The New York Times, April 21, 2011.
- "The Social Side to the Casco Viejo" Lonely Planet Travel Blogs
<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/travelblogs/508/107584/The+Social+Side+to+the+Casco+Viejo,+Panama+City?destId=358509>

Sattelite photo of current areas



Proposed Coastal Road



Leaked renderings of "Nuevo Amador" project. Note that renderings show earlier government proposal for landfill around Casco Viejo, which appears to have been replaced by the proposed causeway/bridge shown above.



Aerial photograph of Casco Viejo (in middle ground) showing preliminary work on Cinta Costera III reaching UNESCO area limit.



PANORAMA

CINTA COSTERA

Tercera fase va por el Casco: Martinelli

Mientras la sociedad civil exige proteger el patrimonio histórico, el Presidente reitera sobre la viabilidad de la obra.

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Pese a que el Gobierno decidió enviar a un equipo de funcionarios a París, a una reunión de la Organización de Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura (Unesco, por sus siglas en inglés) para tratar de convencer al organismo internacional sobre la viabilidad de construir la fase tres de la cinta costera por el Casco Antiguo, el presidente, Ricardo Martinelli, da por hecho que la obra va.

Ayer, tras una protesta contra la construcción de la vía por el Casco Antiguo, Martinelli calificó a quienes se oponen al proyecto de "grupo minúsculo de personas que ha acaparado una gran cantidad de tierras aquí en el Casco Viejo" y los acusó de no querer el desarrollo de los residentes de El Chorrillo, Barraza y el resto de la ciudad.

Agregó que sus líderes tienen influencia en un medio de comunicación cuyo nombre no precisó. "Pareciera que son los que están creando esta alharaca y este alboroto". Se mostró seguro de que en la reunión del Comité del Patrimonio Mundial de la Unesco, que se desarrollará del 19 al 29 de junio en París, se llegará a "un término aceptable para el pueblo panameño, la ciudad de Panamá y los residentes del Casco Viejo", dijo.

En abril pasado, la Unesco advirtió al Gobierno panameño sobre la posibilidad de que el monumento Panamá la Vieja y el Casco Antiguo salgan de la lista de Patrimonio Histórico. Lo que más preocupaba al organismo era el uso del Casco Antiguo para construir la tercera fase de la cinta costera.

Hildegard Vásquez, de la Fundación Calicanto, quien participó ayer de una protesta frente a la Cancillería



Piquete. Grupos de la sociedad civil y residentes de San Felipe realizan protestas contra proyecto vial. LA PRENSA/Joniel Omaña



PANORAMA

Compartir

POLEMICA CONSTRUCCION

Tramo marino es la nueva opción para cinta costera

El presidente de la República, Ricardo Martinelli, dijo ayer que si la Unesco se opone a la tercera propuesta "es problema de ellos".

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La suerte está echada. El Gobierno está decidido a realizar la tercera fase de la cinta costera, pese a la oposición de la Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura (Unesco).

Ayer, el presidente de la República, Ricardo Martinelli, durante la inauguración de la tercera fase de la cinta costera, a la que lo acompañó el exmandatario de Brasil Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, reveló que hay otra opción para la tercera etapa.

Las dos opciones mencionadas por las autoridades para concretar esta fase eran la construcción de un túnel —que conectaría la avenida Balboa con la de Los Poetas—, o una circunvalación que bordearía el tramo marino del Casco Antiguo, en San Felipe. Ambas propuestas fueron criticadas por Unesco a través de un informe con fecha de abril pasado, ya que causarían efectos negativos a la zona declarada Patrimonio Histórico de la Humanidad, en 1996.

No obstante, ahora sale a relucir otra alternativa: un tramo marino muy parecido al del Corredor Sur, el cual saldría de la avenida Balboa y llegaría a la de Los Poetas.

Martinelli informó que el viernes de la próxima semana tienen cita con los representantes de Unesco, en Francia, a quienes les presentarán las tres propuestas.

Sin embargo, esta reunión sería meramente de cortesía, debido a que el mandatario aseguró que si el organismo internacional se opone nuevamente "es problema de ellos".

La comisión gubernamental que irá al país europeo estaría compuesta por el ministro de Obras Públicas, Federico Suárez, y la directora del Instituto Nacional de Cultura (Inac), Maruja Herrera.

Sobre las personas que se oponen a la fase tres de la cinta costera, el Presidente dijo: "Hay muchos especuladores en el Casco Antiguo y cuatro gatos que tienen secuestrado ese lugar. No me importa si me critican, pero no podemos dejar de hacer ese proyecto".



fase dos. A un costo de \$52 millones la ampliación incluye una nueva vialidad, una plaza de vendedores, estacionamientos soterrados y la plaza Cultural. LA PRENSA/Ana Rentería



Exhibit 2—Panamanian Laws Broken by the Landfill or Bridge Options

1. Law 2 of 1920 specifically declares the fortified wall surrounding Casco Antiguo a historical monument.
2. Law 91 of 1976 regulating historical monuments declared Casco Antiguo a National Historical Monument and permits only recuperation, conservation and restoration works to take place within the Monument.
3. Law 14 of 1982 creating the National Directorate of Historical Heritage (DNPH) requiring DNPH approval of all projects adjacent to historical monuments to prevent their deterioration or demuniton. (Note: neither the landfill nor the bridge have been approved by DNPH).
4. Law 9 of 1997 incorporating in the National Monument all plazas, lands, walls, buildings whether on land or extending over the sea.
5. Executive Decree Number 51 of 22 April 2004 prohibiting all construction that would negatively affect the historical character of Casco Antiguo within 200 meters from the coast.
6. Law 16 of 2007 regarding the buffer zones around historical monuments ensuring the maintenance of a visual connection and immediate access of the Casco Antiguo monment with the Pacific Ocean. Specifically mentions preserving the surrounding sea scape as part of the integral value of the monuments.
7. Law 6 of 2002 regarding institutional transperency requires public participation in all admistrative acts connected with construction, infrastructure and property valuations that could affect the interests and rights of citizens.