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15 PESOS



The beach at Chalacatepec as it may never look again. Work on a 1.3-billion dollar tourist development may begin before the end of the year

FEATURE

Supporters of 'New Cancun' take naysayers to task

Drive up the Jalisco coast from Manzanillo, past Melaque and La Manzanilla, and you'll soon come across some of the most beautiful and pristine beaches in the world—untouched by human hand. For now, that is. One of these beaches is an idyllic seven-kilometer stretch in an area known as Chalacatepec, 20 kilometers south of Tomatlan. It's been the center of much discussion ever since Jalisco Governor Emilio Gonzalez boldly – and irresponsibly, some say – announced that it would become Mexico's "New Cancun," namely a massive 1.3-billion dollar low-density tourist development to eventually encompass 13,000 hotel rooms.

But far from filling the pockets of a few already wealthy developers, promoters of the planned resort argue its major benefit would be to detonate

social development in Tomatlan, one of Jalisco's poorest municipalities that is plagued by family disintegration, drug addiction and child prostitution.

Its supporters say ideologue left-wing legislators in the Jalisco Congress are mistakenly opposing the resort and are deaf to the needs of locals, most of whom welcome the development as a means of social advancement.

The land for the resort – former communal ejido farm property – has already been purchased for 156 million dollars by the Instituto de Pensiones del Estado de Jalisco (IPE), which has teamed up in a business partnership with private developers Rasaland, a group backed by Goldman Sachs and Texas Pacific Group. This is the first time that the



pension fund for state workers has dabbled in anything other than financial instruments and some opposition politicians and union leaders have fiercely criticized the move for potentially placing retirement funds at risk. In response, IPE says workers' pensions amount to just six percent of its total funds. Normal returns of around 15 percent could be as high as 35 percent if the business/investment project turns out to be a big success, they say.

Giving testimony this week before a state congressional committee, IPE President Eduardo Mar de la Paz said paperwork for the Chalacatepec development is currently being submitted for a "rigorous" environmental impact study. Once that is approved, work on the resort could start before the end of the year, he said. Provisional plans call for the development to be finished by 2017.

Mar de la Paz said the legal path was clear

and that contrary to some reports, no legal action has been filed by any of the ejiditarios or farmers who sold 1,200 hectares of their land to the developers. If any oversights happen to surface, he said they would be resolved, no matter the financial cost.

Mar de la Paz stressed that IPE did not pay in inflated rates for the land – seven times the market price, according to Raul Vargas of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). Multinational real estate corporation CB Richard Ellis valued the land at 15.35 dollars a square meter and IPE/Rasaland paid 13 dollars, Mar de la Paz pointed out. (Last year, project director Ricardo Santa Cruz Mahony said negotiations had taken place individually with 50 ejiditarios, noting that higher sums were paid for land overlooking the beach than for parcels further inland.)

Interestingly, campesino and civic groups

Chalacatepec is situated almost midway between Puerto Vallarta and Manzanillo. A new airport to service the area, often referred to as the Costa Alegre, is being built in conjunction with the tourist development



from Tomatlan accompanied Mar de la Paz in his congressional hearing this week and voiced criticisms of Vargas and other leftist PRD heavyweights, who they say are running a disinformation campaign about Chalacatepec.

Tomatlan activist Neyra Godoy Rodríguez, a representative of the NGO Desarrollo Intelectual, said the politicians are wrong that developers would commit “ecocide” in Chalacatepec. “It’s obvious they don’t know the land there because it is very deteriorated due to years of bad agricultural practices and misuse of agro-chemicals,” she said.

Francisco Arias Rama, president of the Consejo Regional Económico y Social de Costa Norte, accused the PRD politicians of “badmouthing the project from the start. They are scaring off investment in Tomatlan. If we don’t have infrastructure no one will invest here. The only factory in Tomatlan used to make ice, now that doesn’t even exist.”

Arias continued: “How is it that these financially well-off deputies want to marginalize the people of Tomatlan and deny them access to dignified health and education services.”

According to government sources, the tourism project can expect to create 3,000 direct and 5,000 indirect jobs.

Santa Cruz has promised to include the local population in all stages of the development, build a seafood market for local fishermen and a turtle museum (the area is a protected hatching habitat for turtles), and rescue the Chalacatepec and Param-Xola wetlands. He said the resort would not only cater to high-end tourists, but ensure that middle-class families are also able to vacation there.

Meanwhile, PRD state legislator Salvador Arellano plans to submit a bill that would prevent IPE officials from using pension funds in private ventures in the future.

