

# Activists fight paving plan for Tijuana's Alamar Creek

Activists call it a "natural treasure in both the local and national context."

By Sandra Dibble 12:30 p.m. Dec. 28, 2012

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TIJUANA — In the midst of eastern Tijuana’s urban sprawl, a stretch of Alamar Creek runs through one of the area’s few remaining green spaces. Most of it would end up covered with concrete if a Mexican federal flood control project moves forward next year.

A [coalition of environmentalists and neighborhood residents](#) has been fighting the plan, which involves building a channel along the Alamar streambed —and highways on either side. They say that the lining project, already nearly two-thirds complete, decimates an important watershed that straddles the international border.

“You don’t have to destroy in order to develop,” said Magdalena Cerda, an environmental activist who lives near the Alamar in the working class neighborhood known as ex-Ejido Chilpancingo, and works for the San Diego-based [Environmental Health Coalition](#). “We

believe that this goes completely against the protection of the environment, and against the responsibility to safeguard human health,” said Cerda, stepping through a grove of willow and cottonwood trees.

The Alamar is a creek that meanders more than six miles across Tijuana, part of system of streams that make up about a third of the [Tijuana River watershed](#), a 1,750-square-mile area that spans the California-Baja California border. The Alamar “is a natural treasure in both the local and national context, and deserves our respect and protection,” stated a letter send last week to Enrique Peña Nieto, Mexico’s new president.

As they launched the [\\$47-million Alamar lining project](#) in May 2011, authorities from Mexico’s National Water Commission, Conagua, said it would not only bring economic benefits by opening new areas for development and increasing property values, but save lives. Channeling the Alamar would protect 40,000 residents, said José Luis Luege, Conagua’s director, and prevent squatters from raising shacks in the floodplain. The Alamar, which like other streambeds in Mexico is under federal control, “has historically been one of the areas of the city most susceptible to unregulated settlements, due to the absence of control and supervision inside a federal zone within a municipality,” a Conagua document states.

While the federal government is overseeing the construction of the 6.5-mile channel on the Alamar, the state government would build roadways and parks on either side.

With much of the channel now lined, activists hope to protect an area that is about 2.5 miles long and 320 yards wide, said Margarita Díaz, director of the [Proyecto Fronterizo de Educación Ambiental](#), a Tijuana-based environmental group. “What we’d like to do is take a second look at the project, given that a concrete lining is not the solution,” she said. “There are many options that are environmentally sustainable.”

Though only recently in the public eye, Alamar Creek—called Cottonwood Creek on the U.S. side—has for years [drawn the attention of academics](#) on both sides of the border.

Emerging from their studies has been a proposal for series of linked urban river parks in the Tijuana River watershed — in Tecate, In Tijuana on the Alamar, and at the Tijuana Estuary in Imperial Beach.

While Tijuana city planners at one point endorsed the Alamar proposal, it didn’t move forward, said Paul Ganster, director of the [Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias](#) at San Diego State University.

“Development pressure and the desire for immediate profit is so strong in an urbanized place like Tijuana that it’s quite difficult to resist those forces,” he said.

Opponents of the Alamar’s lining point to other flood control projects successfully carried out without concrete that such as Tecate’s Río Parque, Río Santa Catarina in Monterrey, and Forrester Creek in San Diego. Carlos de la Parra, a researcher at Tijuana’s [Colegio de la](#)

[Frontera Norte](#), said conserving the Alamar can preserve important ecosystems, and help recharge the underlying aquifer.

Though there has been no official confirmation, it seems that the environmentalists' message may be getting through to Conagua. Luege, who stepped down last month, had made it clear that he was not planning on moving forward with the last part of the Alamar project, said Osvel Hinojosa, director of the Water and Wetlands Program of the Mexican environmental group, [Pronatura Noroeste](#).

Still, "with the change of administration, it's important to reinforce that aspect, that the Alamar should be protected," Hinojosa said.

The Tijuana River watershed is also the setting for a separate [riparian restoration project](#) involving Pronatura, community group, and the Baja California government. The plan is to use treated wastewater from new plants to restore a 172-acre riparian area at the foot of Rodríguez Dam.

"People don't even realize that they have a river, even though they drive through it every day," Hinojosa said. The idea is to start changing that perspective."

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