

Charlie Wakeem Steps Down as Frontera's Treasurer

Well-known Charlie Wakeem has recently stepped down as Treasurer of the Frontera Land Alliance. El Pasoans recognize Charlie's as the first surname of the "Wakeem/Teschner Nature Preserve of Resler Canyon." What not all remember is why his name comes first. So here's some Frontera history:

Charlie and his family had long been living on Somerset Drive in a beautiful home directly overlooking the 91-acre Resler Canyon property. Charlie, the son of Lebanese immigrants, was co-owner/co-manager of a local furniture store and he devoted himself from the 1980s onward to Rotary. (He later served on four City boards and committees including OSAB ['Open Space Advisory Board' and as its chair], the Subdivision Ordinance Rewrite Committee, the Plan El Paso/Comprehensive Plan Committee and the Capital Improvements Advisory Committee, which makes recommendations to City Council regarding impact fees on infrastructure in new growth.) Life moved nicely along. So early in August of 2003 it came as a shock to Charlie and the rest of his neighbors on both rims of the Canyon that the property was owned by a developer who had just announced plans to build 196 single-family houses there. We neighbors naively assumed that this canyon would always be kept in its natural state. Solely because a change in the zoning of some of the Canyon land was needed before development could take place, the neighbors had to be informed, and the developer's plans required approval by El Paso's City Plan Commission and then its City Council before the permit to build could be granted. And so the campaign to conserve the Canyon started.

Enter the Coronado Neighborhood Association (CNA), which had grown dormant following a brief but intense period of 1990s activity. A CNA meeting quickly ensued. A hundred people showed up, and Charlie was elected President. The CNA grew by 300 percent within weeks, and it began to hold well-attended biweekly meetings in the Coronado Townhomes' clubhouse on the north rim of the Canyon. Charlie spent countless hours researching city, state and federal code, and dozens more discussing "zoning" with members of City Council and then-Mayor John Cook. He also reached out to the media and especially the *El Paso Times*, whose editor (Don Flores) was receptive to our concerns. Some folks called us NIMBYs, but then they listened to our points: The canyon's two arroyos efficiently transported floodwater, but if the land were developed they would have to be replaced by extensive and expensive sewage systems plus an open-air reservoir attracting bugs. The canyon's slopes would be denuded by construction activities (including new streets) and thus eroded by rain. The *de facto* nature preserve—home to deer, rabbits, foxes, raccoons and other species—would be lost forever. And so we neighbors—always led by Charlie and always wearing "Save Resler Canyon" t-shirts—started attending City Plan Commission and City Council meetings, sitting together as a well-behaved group. (It helped that many of us were sexagenarians or older, a cohort with a well-known high voting rate.)

By 2004, both City Plan and City Council had gone on record as opposing Canyon development. Not surprisingly, the developer sued the City (but not—to his credit—the CNA). Things had gotten tense. It was then—in early 2005—that Charlie and I talked about a possible purchase of the Canyon. In January 2005, Charlie and I met in secret with two attorneys from El Paso's oldest law firm to talk about the possibility. An offer was made to the developer. But it wasn't until August 2005—following a further string of pro-CNA comments from the *El Paso Times*—

that the owner decided the time had come to negotiate. Charlie—by then on the Board of Directors of Frontera—took an active role in the negotiations, and on October 11, 2005 the *Times* announced that an agreement had been reached whereby Frontera would be gifted by the undersigned the Canyon's purchase price of \$1,868,500 (plus—on a continuing basis—legal fees that eventually amounted to around \$100,000) so that it could buy the land.

Now the fun had just begun, but Charlie's (and Frontera's) work was hardly done. From October 12 through the date that Frontera actually purchased the Canyon—Dec. 23, 2005—there ensued lengthy, complicated and sometimes tense negotiations with City staff regarding overdue repairs to City water lines, sewers and streets leading up to the canyon itself, especially on its south rim in the Coronado Heights neighborhood. Thanks to assistance provided by several Council members, the City agreed to pay for and undertake the infrastructure work. The deal was signed, the Canyon was Frontera's, and a large celebration—organized by Charlie and Mac Snodgrass, a very active member of the CNA—was held on the northern rim of the Canyon in the Coronado Townhomes neighborhood right by Mac's home. But there was more to come! Within weeks, the El Paso [County] Central Appraisal District (CAD) jacked up the Canyon's valuation from \$150,000 (when the land lay fallow and most of it was zoned for development but not yet developed) to \$950,000 “in light of the Canyon's recent purchase price.” Never mind that the deed of sale absolutely forbade any development/construction in the Canyon whatsoever, and that the terms of the deed “ran with the land,” which meant that any future owners would be bound by it. So Charlie, Maria Trunk (co-founder of Frontera and its President from 2004 through 2007) and the undersigned repeatedly approached CAD, requesting the valuation be lowered. No dice, despite the fact that Texas allows county appraisal districts to substantially lower the valuation of land whose deeds of sale forbid development. Thus it was back once again to the city's oldest law firm for 22 months of nip and tuck. Upshot: the Canyon's valuation in 2008 was dropped to almost zero, and Frontera now pays around \$25 in annual property tax.

As for the CNA itself, it continued active for nine more years but then went into “abeyance” for want of further neighborhood work to do. Charlie remained its President throughout and stayed on as Frontera's Treasurer until recently. So what does Charlie say about those exciting successful times? He says this: Large numbers of calm, persistent and well-organized “real people” who are rooted in their neighborhoods, who know lawyers they are willing and able to pay, and who are connected from the outset with a 501(c)3 land-trust organization such as Frontera will make a difference and stand a good chance of winning. Conserved in perpetuity and always available for “nature” experiences, Resler Canyon is proof that everyday people and land conservationists can and must work together for the benefit of Community and Nature.

—Richard Teschner