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1

Learning the Lay of the Land

On the porch of the general store fifty villagers sat on piles of wood or carefully stacked bags of cement mix, waiting. The murmur of their words, in the throaty tones of Mixe, mixed with the thrum of late September rain. The porch was large enough to accommodate the whole group without crowding, small enough to allow them to speak without raising their voices and still be heard. Beyond the porch, webs of barbed wire separated backyard gardens of banana, papaya, mango, and tangerine trees from velvet patches of low-slung forest. Past the gardens, buses and tractor-trailers grunted along a two-lane highway, slowed by axle-cracking speed bumps and potholes. Far beyond the highway, green-draped hills undulated toward blue mountains, the Sierra Sur of Oaxaca State.

Carlos Beas ducked his head under the rusted edge of the porch roof, striding into the meeting a bit late. He wore old blue jeans and a t-shirt; the villagers wore wide-brimmed hats and sun-bleached work clothes. People nodded and mumbled their hellos to Beas as he stepped onto the porch. “Buenas tardes. Ya llegaste.” They welcomed him to their village with the normal greeting, “You have arrived.” He bobbed his head in response. A smile skittered across his face but his light

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2. Señor Vásquez attends a community meeting organized by UCIZONI, the Association of Indigenous Communities in the Northern Zone of the Isthmus (2000).

PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR.

brown eyes stayed serious. The villagers' huaraches scuffed the cement floor as they moved forward to shake his hand. Only a few—mostly the local leaders—looked up to meet his gaze directly. Beas towered over everyone, though he is not quite six feet tall. He was the only one who sweated as the rain's steam rose around them.

The meeting had been called a few days earlier, after villagers had seen several strangers poking around their farmland. Those strangers had said they were surveyors working for the government. They offered no further information before they finished whatever it was they were doing and drove away in their shiny trucks. News of the visiting surveyors spread from house to house, crossing dirt roads and lines of flapping laundry. People got to thinking. Was this somehow related to the rumor that had been floating around for the past couple of years? About the new highway? What were those strangers doing, tromping through their fields, looking through boxes attached to metal tripods, taking notes and measuring distances? Did all this interest in their land mean that the rumored highway would cut right through their village?

The two-lane highway, the one visible from the porch of the general store, had been built in the 1950s. It grazed the fringes of this village, called Boca del Monte, in the center of Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The villagers still referred to the opening of the current trans-isthmus highway with the derision reserved for old insults that might be repeated: "Cuando viene un rico con su carretera" ("When a rich man comes with his highway"). Once a remote outpost several miles from the railroad tracks, Boca del Monte became a roadside pit stop when the highway opened. Travelers stopped to buy sodas and eat grilled chicken. Some did not stop, but tossed their trash out rolled-down windows. Villagers built

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roadside shops and organized a litter patrol. The western edge of the village became a front doorstep to the world, a short detour from the Pan-American Highway, which ran across the isthmus east to west.

The village's name, Boca del Monte, means gateway to the mountains, or to the wildlands. It marks the entryway to the Chimalapas rainforest that covers the hills of the central region of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, where a road veered away from the trans-isthmus highway, through the village and many miles into the rainforest. Thanks to that side-route, much of the rainforest that it cut through had been turned into field and pasture. The people of Boca del Monte had seen decades' worth of chainsaws and bulldozers pass by their general store and into the rainforest, while truckloads of timber and cattle come back. As some of the villagers liked to joke, "Pretty soon, we'll be Boca de Nada—Gateway to Nothing." Still, they took the long view; their ancestors had lived on the isthmus for several thousand years.

One of the men standing on the general store's front porch—one of the few who looked Carlos Beas straight in the eye—asked him about the route of the rumored new superhighway. As Beas began to speak, everyone turned toward him, subtly shifting position until the circle closed around him. "Maybe it's going to pass right through the village, maybe it's going to pass to one side," he said, tilting his head in a gesture of *Who knows?* Either way, it would separate farmers from their fields. "I don't know how the farmers are going to cross it—flying or what?"

Amusement riffled through the group. Unlike farm towns of the American Midwest, where single houses sit in the middle of corn or soybean fields, rural Mexican villages tend to cluster their houses near the small buildings where residents pray, buy cooking oil and sugar, and make telephone

calls. In Boca del Monte some villagers walked more than half an hour from their homes, machete in hand, to the far-flung fields where they grew corn, beans, yucca, malanga, hot peppers, and tamarind.

“We just asked the government for more information about the route, so for the moment, we’re only guessing,” Beas said. “Look, here are some documents about it.” He held up a thick manila folder, then slid out a letter and waved it. He began to read: “‘The Director General of Federal Highways has contracted the services of the COINSA company to do the necessary fieldwork for the highway project.’ So, according to this, on May 24th they have already contracted out the highway project.” Beas paused as the younger ones whispered to a few of the older ones, translating his words into Mixe, the local language. Beas slipped the sheet back into the dog-eared folder and pulled out a second letter. “And here, on August 25th, they tell you that’s not true.” He shuffled the papers again and held up a third letter: “And on September 22nd, they’re telling you they’re just at the research phase.” He closed the folder and held it aloft. “What does all this mean, *compañeros* and *compañeras*?” He continued without a pause. “It means they’re not taking you into account. I’m just here to tell you to prepare yourselves. This isn’t like fifty years ago, when they paved the *carretera*. You can’t walk across a superhighway; the cars go very fast. Those of you who have traveled to Mexico City know what a superhighway is.”

Most of the people gathered on the porch had never made that trip of ten hours in the fastest, most expensive bus. From where they stood they could see the bus stop on the far side of the highway, where buses carried their young men north toward the U.S. border. Away. Vehicles on the current trans-isthmus highway passed Boca del Monte at residential speeds; children and old women sold bags of peeled oranges and

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baked *totopos* to drivers and passengers. The trans-isthmus road they saw from the edge of the porch felt no more like a superhighway than their general store felt like a Wal-Mart.

Beas continued: “If you don’t pressure the government, I doubt they will build bridges for ox-carts and for people. Then how will you cross it? You can’t fight this alone. If we don’t watch out, the heavy machinery will be here at work before we know it.”

Beas stepped out of the center of the circle. Several men rose slowly to speak. One mentioned that people had come from a nearby village, saying they had seen the surveyors, too. A second man stepped forward. “They have to get permission before they can come on our farmland. They can’t just walk in here like cattle rustlers, screwing around.” Another villager insisted it was important to confront those mysterious workers directly if they showed up again. If the villagers didn’t complain, he said, the government would never know their concerns. Nods and ayes circled the porch. Until they knew more, the discussion was closed.

The group moved on to the final agenda item: an ongoing conflict between Boca del Monte and the national oil company, *Petróleos de México*, or PEMEX. The narrow PVC tubing of oil pipelines laced Boca del Monte’s farmland. One line had ruptured the previous month, pouring PEMEX oil over cornfields and into the Sarabia River that wound through them. Black poison slicked their farmland and dead fish piled up on iridescent riverbanks.

The villagers had demanded retribution and PEMEX had offered a lump-sum payment of one thousand pesos per household, or nearly one hundred dollars, as much cash as a typical family earned in several months. It was one-time compensation for what could be a long-term problem. The soil would absorb the petroleum but would release some of it

during each year's rainy season, bringing back the impacts of the oil spill—lower soil fertility, less oxygen for plant roots, and stunted plant growth—year after year.

“Perhaps the heavy rains have washed the oil away?” one man ventured.

“Yes,” Beas replied. “Some of it has been washed away, but what about all the oil that had already seeped deep into the soil before the rains came?”

A middle-aged man stepped forward to speak in favor of PEMEX's proposal. Raindrops pummeled the porch roof more insistently. The circle loosened; people avoided one another's eyes. The man switched into Mixe, closing Carlos Beas out of the debate. He went on for a long time while Beas stared at the gray floor, concentrating so he might catch the general gist of the speech. The man finished, tipped his head in a slight bow, and stepped back to his pile of wood. The group seemed to soften a bit; the man was pulling them to his side.

Beas kicked at the floor and all eyes turned toward him. “What if, three years from now, your farmland doesn't produce?” A faint note of irritation tinged his words, his long hands cut the air sharply. “That money will be gone and you still won't have a way to feed your families.”

A third man, the leader of the village assembly, spoke up to agree with Beas. With his words the tenor of the gathering shifted once again. The group murmured its assent as the rain faded away. Beas walked around the circle and shook hands with each person. He thanked them and said he would return as soon as there was more news. He turned and stepped off the porch into the last moments of daylight.

Throughout the meeting I had stayed at the porch's edge, shaking hands and introducing myself only to the few who were brave and curious enough to approach me—as much

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a stranger as the surveyors who had prompted the gathering. I explained to those who asked that I, too, had come because of the rumored highway. I worked with a community organization in the United States that was concerned about the same things that concerned them. I wanted to learn from their experience, from the way they organized meetings like this one. I wanted to know what the highway would mean for Boca del Monte and the rest of the isthmus residents, the *istmeños*. They nodded and thanked me for coming and for my interest in their community. Their labored Spanish carried Mixe's deep rumble.

I attended that meeting in September 1999 as part of a month-long visit to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. It was my third visit to the isthmus since first learning about the rumored highway in the summer of 1997. I'd planned my 1999 trip after receiving a letter from Carlos Beas in July. His note to me had begun, "Ya nos cayó el chahuixtle." He continued: "El chahuixtle in Mexico is a disease of corn plants. When people say that it has come, it means something bad has happened. Very close to Matías Romero, work has begun for the Highway." Even writing in Spanish he had to translate for me; indigenous words like *chahuixtle* didn't appear in most dictionaries. And his use of a capital "H" on highway, a dramatic flourish typical of him, carried great weight in Spanish, which capitalizes far fewer words than English does. He concluded his letter: "We've asked for information about its route and we'll organize a demonstration soon. We're still fighting with PEMEX about the oil spill, and there's not been much progress. I think we'll block the carretera. Warm greetings from all of us."

It had been nearly three years since the news of a planned highway had trickled south from Mexico City to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The rumor went like this: The new

supercarretera would be four lanes wide, if not six; it would carry tractor-trailers at blistering speeds; it would cut obliviously through fields, forests, and villages; and it would return the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to the global prominence it had enjoyed in the years before the Panama Canal had been completed. The highway would run almost directly north-south, connecting the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean. It would bisect the isthmus, which stretches east to west.

On July 22, 1996, a front-page headline in a Mexico City newspaper had announced, “Isthmus to Be Opened to Foreign Capital.” The article was casually optimistic about the speed with which the highway would be built, claiming that half of the funds would come from “the royal families of the United Arab Emirates.” The newspaper was wrong about that. Five days later it reported the *istmeños*’ response to the news: “Three thousand campesinos, indigenous people, and residents of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec will begin a march to Mexico City next Monday, to demand . . . a national referendum on the Trans-Isthmus Megaproject that the government is promoting.” In spite of the immediate response from thousands of *istmeños*, who asked for the opportunity to comment on the grandly named Trans-Isthmus Megaproject, news was slow to filter into the region’s smallest towns and villages. For the most part the only thing that people heard about was the highway, but that was enough for people to identify it as *chahuixtle*, as Beas explained in his letter to me: *una desgracia*, a misfortune.

The “we” of Beas’s letter referred to UCIZONI, the organization he had cofounded in the early 1980s. The Spanish acronym, pronounced “oo-see-SO-nee,” stood for Association of Indigenous Communities in the Northern Zone of the Isthmus. It was a loose association, not a formal union, and required no particular political, ethnic, or religious affiliation—in

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this sense it was unusual among istmeño civic groups, which tended to draw membership from people of a single ethnicity, political party, or church. UCIZONI's members lived in indigenous communities — rural villages or, more rarely, urban neighborhoods. The large majority of the members were Mixe. Some belonged to one of the other ethnic groups of the isthmus: Zapotec or Mixtec or Chinantec or Huave. A few members weren't indigenous at all, but *mestizo*, like Carlos Beas. Nearly all UCIZONI members lived in the “northern zone” of the Oaxacan isthmus, which is to say, the central isthmus, because the northern isthmus belonged to the state of Veracruz.

When it came to troubles like the highway rumor, central-isthmus residents turned to UCIZONI, the organization could get responses even from government agencies that ignored everyone else. UCIZONI staffers had written letters and made phone calls, asking state and federal government officials for more information about the new highway's path. The fat manila folder that Beas had brought to the meeting in Boca del Monte was the result of that work. The letters in that folder provided the sort of answers they often received from the Mexican government: confusion and contradiction. The plan for a new four-lane superhighway across their land might have been an outrage, but as far as UCIZONI members were concerned, it was no surprise.

Having said our good-byes to the Boca del Monte village assembly, Beas and I got back into UCIZONI's company car, a sixties-style Volkswagen Beetle. It was a half hour drive to Matías Romero, where Beas had lived for fifteen years, starting in UCIZONI's earliest days. As he drove he was uncharacteristically quiet, staring hard at the carretera that ribboned before us. Carretera can translate as either “road” or “highway,” but this trans-isthmus road wouldn't count

as a highway anywhere north of the Rio Grande, or maybe even north of Mexico City. The tires drummed across speed bumps and pitched in and out of potholes.

I ventured into the silence. “Difficult meeting.” His expression softened, as if he agreed, but then he said firmly, “No, I’ve seen pistols at meetings. That was not difficult.”

We arrived in Matías Romero long after dark, just about time for dinner. We passed UCIZONI’s office on the town’s main street, Calle de Hombres Ilustres (“Street of Illustrious Men”)—or, as the women of UCIZONI liked to call it, “Street of Illustrious Women and Men.” Brightly painted banners draped the office’s chipped cement façade: “No to the Megaproject!” “505 Years of Resistance!” A few moments later Beas angled the Volkswagen Beetle to the high curb; we’d arrived at his home. Because Matías Romero only had the sort of hotels where you could rent rooms by the hour, I was Beas’s houseguest.

He dug through the contents of his wheezing refrigerator. On the fridge door magnets from Aruba, Panama, and New York—all places he had visited—held a poster of the most famous Zapatista, Subcomandante Marcos. In the poster, Marcos raises his middle finger to the camera and puffs on his pipe through a hole in his balaclava. In the neighboring state of Chiapas, the Zapatistas had raised arms against the globalized, free-trade economy five years earlier. All over Mexico, organizations like UCIZONI had taken great inspiration from the Zapatistas’ declaration of independence from economic globalization. Beas had served as an advisor to the Zapatistas during their negotiations with the federal government, while UCIZONI members had visited Zapatista villages, and vice versa.

Beas assembled one-quarter of an onion, a few shriveled cloves of garlic, and a half-dozen pockmarked tomatoes and

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tomatillos on the kitchen table. I chopped the vegetables into half-moons as he laid a dented pan on the stove and twisted on the gas full blast. Blue flames curled up and around the skillet as he poured in cooking oil. He towered over the small stove but he was very much at home in the kitchen. He snapped week-old tortillas into pieces and dropped them into the roiling pool.

A mold-mottled Frida Kahlo print hung above the stove. In the self-portrait, one of her most famous images, a head-dress blooms out around the artist's face with floral white lace filling the space around her grim stare, over the viewer's left shoulder. It is a portrait of Frida as a *tehuana*, a woman from Tehuantepec. Kahlo adopted almost every element of the region's dress: the cropped tunics and long skirt, the twisted braids, and heavy gold jewelry.

As the tortillas fried, I thought about Frida's obsession with istmeño symbols. I inhaled the breeze that drifted in the window, redolent of gardenias and propane, banana blossoms and ripe mangos. The neighbor's parrots screeched, a broom rasped across wet pavement, the last of the afternoon rain plinked from the roof.

When I had first visited the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Mexican friends had said, "Ah, the isthmus, the place the Spanish never truly conquered, the place women command economic power, the place where globalization is embraced and rejected with equal force." These comments were oversimplified yet all too true. As such, the isthmus has always held a central place in Mexico's cultural imagination. By the time I prepared that dinner with Carlos Beas, two years after my first visit to the isthmus, I had become obsessed with the story of the isthmus. Would the highway be built? Would industrialized towns completely replace villages of farmers and fishermen? If not, how would organizations like UCIZONI prevent it? It

seemed an impossible task, yet the *istmeños* had accomplished the impossible before. How? Why was community organizing more successful here than it was in the United States?

Beas tipped the cutting board over the blender and whined the vegetables into salsa. He drained the oil from the frying pan and poured in the gritty puree. I poured water from the five-gallon jug into tall, slim glasses with worn images of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Beas slid the greenish stew onto two plates.

I tasted all of the isthmus as my mouth closed around a forkful of *chilaquiles*: earth, corn, grease, hot chile, and sour tang.

“This is a perfect meal,” I said to Beas.

He laughed. “This is the food of the very poor.”

Though his full name is Juan Carlos Beas Torres, most people called him *Licenciado* or simply *Lic*. Unlike most of the people he worked with at UCIZONI, he had a college degree. Those who addressed him by name, mostly good friends and younger people, called him Beas. A Spanish homophone for “You may see,” it was an unusual and most appropriate surname: Beas was an excellent teacher and a compelling public speaker but he could be insistent to the edge of bullying.

Born into a middle-class mestizo family in the northern city of Guadalajara, he’d left home at fifteen, landing in Mexico City just as the sixties turned to the seventies. Eventually he finished college, but before that he—like many others of his generation—marched through city streets, got arrested, went to jail, and was tortured there. Beas came to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec for the first time when he was twenty-three years old. Just out of college, he landed a job teaching anthropology to young villagers, to the children of families called *indios*, the ones who had long been the subject

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of outsiders' anthropological research. His job was to turn traditional anthropology on its head, to transform those who had been studied into the researchers. His students would no longer simply answer long lists of questions, but devise the questions themselves. The same government whose jailers had tortured Beas handed him the job. This was not an unusual turn of events, but an example of the long Mexican tradition—stretching back to the conquistadors—of officials trying to co-opt opposition. A couple of years after young Beas moved to the isthmus, the government canceled funding for the anthropology program. As Beas explained, “The program got out of their control.” He gave up only that last detail easily. He would stack up details about his background like children's blocks, then knock them down and rebuild them in a different pattern.

Watching the meeting at Boca del Monte's general store, I had wondered whether people had truly agreed with the decision made about PEMEX, or had felt pressure to meet Beas's fervor with acquiescence. By the time of that assembly I had attended perhaps twenty community meetings with Beas. He had been the first person I'd met in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and had become my guide. I admired his long experience and easy skill at the sort of work I'd done, not always successfully, through the 1990s: grassroots organizing. I had nudged together small groups of people in Idaho or Massachusetts or New York or South Carolina or Washington, cajoling action from concern. I organized people who opposed the North American Free Trade Agreement, or nuclear weapons; or U.S. military aid to Central America. The hardest part of the work wasn't grappling with complex, interconnected issues, it was inspiring people to overcome the lure of short-term, short-sighted decisions—the equivalent of accepting PEMEX's one-time payment for long-term damage.

During the decade that I had worked as a grassroots organizer, it seemed to me that our collective efforts had become less effective, our strategies narrower in both vision and results. Four months out of college, during my first week as a grassroots organizer in a cramped office in Oakland above a hardcore porn shop, the trainer had told us, “Burnout is the long despair of doing nothing well.” A decade later I turned this statement over in my mind. I was burned out, but was this because our organizing was so effective at doing *nothing* or because we were not doing anything *well*? I decided that stepping outside my own country, culture, and context was the best way to gain the perspective I needed. I wanted to learn how grassroots organizing worked in a community very different from my own. I didn’t know of a place more different than the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

During the Isthmus Is Our Own forum that I’d attended in 1997, hundreds had gathered in the mud-and-cement courtyard of a municipal community center not far from Boca del Monte. I was there representing a nonprofit organization in Boston, where I worked at the time. At the isthmus forum, I squeezed into a narrow space on a wood-plank bench. A handful of languages settled around me as Beas, whom I had just met, called the meeting to order. The peasants, fishermen, teachers, environmental activists, village leaders, and university professors who crowded the space had only recently learned about the plans for the Trans-Isthmus Megaproject, and they came to the forum to debate their options. Some wanted to hold a second forum, inviting federal government officials to come and explain to them what the Megaproject plans entailed. Others dismissed that possibility because, as one person put it, “the government does whatever it wants with the peasants.”

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The group constructed a list titled “We Don’t Want the Megaproject Because”:

The government must not accept foreign or private investment without first consulting directly with our communities.

The municipal presidents are our *only* appointed negotiators.

We know it’s going to hurt our communities and not benefit us.

It doesn’t respect the earth, and where will our children live?

The superhighway is going to displace people who live near it.

We have the right to an opinion because it’s *our* land.

It divides those who have land from those who don’t.

The government hasn’t kept its promises to us.

It will bring vices to our communities, like drug addiction, prostitution, and more cantinas.

It will bring environmental degradation.

The forum concluded with a public statement that asserted, “With the development of an industrial corridor, we see glimmers of the ‘proletarianization’ of the farmers and the indigenous people. We will lose our dignity. Without land, we will become factory boys, simple workers with miserable wages and inferior jobs.”

On the last day of the gathering, one of the founding members of UCIZONI, Delfino Juárez Toledo, stood up before the group to insist that maintaining their identity as indigenous istmeños was crucial to any campaign to stop the Megaproject. “If we deny that we are Huaves, Zoques,

Nahua-Popolucos, Chontals, Chinantecs, or Zapotecs, then we're already screwed." Later Delfino would tell me that there were two things about the 1997 forum that had made it one of the most important he had ever attended. One was a change in the participants: the academics and "the people who barely spoke Spanish" began to realize "they weren't part of separate worlds." The other was a change in the world beyond the gathering: the grassroots groups that had organized The Isthmus Is Our Own were taken more seriously by the media and by the government.

It was the conversations between the university professors and the peasants that interested me most. In a decade of grassroots organizing I had never seen such a wide range of people sit down together and debate their options.

The week I received the letter from Beas telling me of the chahuixtle, I quit my all-consuming grassroots campaign job and planned a month-long trip to the isthmus. I dreamed of moving there altogether; I simply had to know how the story of the highway would end. Would it be built? Would istmeños like those in Boca del Monte have a say in the plans? If the highway were built, what would it bring with it?

The chahuixtle wasn't just a superhighway, but a large spiderweb of industrial-development projects known collectively as the Trans-Isthmus Megaproject. Many istmeños referred to it as El plan de Ochoa. Felipe Ochoa's name appeared regularly in Mexico City newspapers, as did details from the plan he had authored. The phrase repeated by Boca del Monte villagers, "When a rich man comes with his highway," wasn't just a figure of speech. I was able to interview Mr. Ochoa twice, once via phone and once at his office.

The first time I spoke to him, in November 1997, he greeted me in perfect English, listened to my introduction, and offered

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a quick mental map of his plan for the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The Trans-Isthmus Megaproject included one hundred and fifty proposed projects, including twenty-four petrochemical facilities, a dozen industrial shrimp farms, two oil refineries, several industrial parks for maquiladora assembly facilities, a quarter-million acres of tree plantations, and a new network of highways and railroads to carry the products of all this industrialization away, to international markets.

As he rattled off the long list I tried to picture his imagined landscape of a future Isthmus of Tehuantepec, with square-edged cement highway dividers, shiny metal factories, and ruler-straight blocks of shrimp farm tanks. This map contrasted sharply with the isthmus I had visited: pale adobe or sherbet-hued cement buildings, weed-filled pavement, and everywhere vegetation in twisting, anarchic profusion.

Felipe Ochoa began our conversation by telling me the central question that drove his work. It was, interestingly, precisely the same as UCIZONI's central question: How can the development of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec be achieved? It was not just the answer to that question, but the definition of the word "development" that created the wide gulf between UCIZONI and Ochoa y Asociados. As one UCIZONI member described that gulf: "We want green development, not one made of concrete."

Felipe Ochoa explained that several U.S. timber companies had already begun investing in southern Mexico. "They looked at the rest of the continent after the problem with the spotted owl up there." I asked him about the opposition—both local and international—to replacing forests and cropland with eucalyptus tree farms.

"You have heard about that?" He paused. "Ecologically, they have a point. No one would agree to covering the isthmus with eucalyptus plantations." Another pause. "Maybe limited plantations."

And what about the national conferences that had been organized by isthmus residents opposed to the Megaproject? “There *are* social groups that feel they will not benefit,” he said.

“Why are they opposing the project?”

“They haven’t been briefed appropriately. The social groups there are very far behind the rest of the country socially and economically.”

There was a grain of truth in his last word at least. Some of the villages on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec ranked among the country’s poorest. Still, the isthmus had a strong regional economy—if a very different one than Felipe Ochoa imagined for the region, from the vantage point of his eighth-floor glass-and-brick office building in a leafy neighborhood on the southern fringe of Mexico City. I visited him there a year before the Boca del Monte assembly meeting about the highway.

As I stepped out of the elevator, OCHOA Y ASOCIADOS glittered in gold tone. “Buenos días, good morning,” the secretary said, sliding from one language to the other so fluidly that I couldn’t tell which was her native one.

She led me to a conference room and I sank into a puffy leather chair, taking in the gleam of the long table and the skyline view out the generous windows. The large room had only two decorations: a pair of handmade clay pots from Oaxaca and a large map of the entire country. As I waited for Felipe Ochoa, I gazed at the map, thinking about the great distance between Mexico City and the U.S. border and the much shorter distance between Mexico City and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

Felipe Ochoa settled himself at the head of the conference table and smoothed his yellow tie against his ample belly. “So, you’re from Boston. I lived in Boston for five years—or, as I say, I spent five *winters* in Boston. I was on the faculty at

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MIT. My wife is from Seattle.” His tone was casual but his words were careful, as he made sure I appreciated his U.S. connections, and that I understood the distance from his eighth-floor office to the long corridors of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was not so great.

My conversations with Ochoa were among the only interviews I conducted in English through nearly a decade talking to people about the Trans-Isthmus Megaproject. Carlos Beas liked to say about people like Felipe Ochoa, “They think in English.” I liked to remind Beas that I, too, thought in English. He would nod and say, as if making a special allowance, “Well, you can’t help that.”

Felipe Ochoa and I talked first about the “global chaos” reported in that morning’s newspapers. It worried him. “With all these things that are happening worldwide, we don’t know what the hell is going to happen.” He raised his palms to emphasize the point.

Still, he was in it for the long haul. For twenty years, he told me, he had dreamed of building a transit corridor across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. His entire career, from Mexico City to Boston and back, had been leading directly toward El plan de Ochoa: more than five hundred pages of charts, maps, project lists, and proposals, all collected at the federal government’s request. Ochoa referred to the document over and over again, as he had when we’d talked on the phone.

I asked him if I might get a copy of the plan.

He waved his hand and gave a helpless look. Ochoa y Asociados had done that work at the pleasure of the federal government, he replied. I would have to get permission from the secretary of communications and transport.

He stepped into the hall and asked his secretary to bring me the cabinet minister’s name and phone number, then returned to his overview of El plan. At its center was a new, four-lane

supercarretera —the equivalent of a U.S. interstate— and a high-speed railroad that would connect two deep-water ports (one on the Pacific Ocean and one on the Gulf of Mexico), plus all manner of industrial development. It was supposed to be a “two-track” development, so to speak, based on both railroad and highway, but Ochoa felt the plan hinged on privatizing the trans-isthmus railroad. That was important because, as he explained, publicly held railway systems made corporate customers nervous. Most of Mexico’s railroad had already been privatized.

He unrolled a map of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec on the table between us and patiently pointed out town after town, explaining where a shrimp farm, or a railroad depot, or an expanded port would be built. His voice was upbeat and full of pride as he spoke of the progress he envisioned for the isthmus.

“So, given all this opportunity, why are so many *istmeños* opposed to the Megaproject?” I asked.

He shrugged. “The experts haven’t been able to portray or communicate properly what the idea is.” His voice rose with excitement as he changed the subject. “Did you see the news from yesterday?”

I nodded. He waved the news article, wanting me to share his enthusiasm. It announced a steel mill to be built on the isthmus, a two-billion-dollar project. The mill was planned for Santa María Zaniza where, as I would learn later, the average adult’s annual cash income was under two hundred dollars. “The whole thing is going to fly because of that!” Ochoa said. “It’s a hell of an investment and a hell of a boost for the region. Once you make an announcement that you are going to have three thousand employees, the opposition is going to be there to see how they can get a piece of the action. If you are talking about three thousand jobs in one little spot, you are feeding fifteen thousand mouths, at least.”

Learning the Lay of the Land

I nodded. “There have been announcements like this for several years but nothing seems to come of them.”

He smiled. “In Mexico, nothing happens until it happens. And when it happens, *everything* happens.”

I knew what he meant. I had seen this phenomenon in activities ranging from fiestas to car accidents. Plans would be delayed until the last possible moment, then come off flawlessly. In other cases, seemingly hopeless attempts would be made to solve big problems, then suddenly the band would start playing or the jack-knifed truck would be spirited off the road, and life would continue as usual.

I had asked Ochoa on the phone about the Megaproject timeline and he had said, “We are ready to go. But I have been saying for the past twenty years, ‘We are ready to go.’”

After about an hour in the conference room, I stood to leave. I thanked Mr. Ochoa for his time and told him I would call the secretary of communications and transport about getting a copy of El plan de Ochoa. He nodded and asked about the rest of my stay in Mexico.

I told him I would be spending most of my time in the isthmus region.

“The isthmus?” Surprise, then puzzlement, crossed his face. “Why are you going there?”

“Well, that’s where the Megaproject is happening.” I said.

He shrugged. “Yes, but there is no information about it there.”

On that point, he was precisely right. But that did not mean there was no information to be found. In the days that followed I called the office of the secretary of communications and transport at least a dozen times. In spite of multiple polite conversations with the receptionist, I was never able to speak with Secretary Aaron Dychter nor formally request

a copy of the Ochoa plan. It was one of the only times I ever had an interview request declined in Mexico.

Nonetheless, a week after my meeting with Felipe Ochoa, I met a staff person from a Mexican environmental organization at an indoor shopping mall not far from Ochoa's office. He and I sat near a noisy fountain, where we wouldn't be overheard, as women clipped by in high heels, swinging fat shopping bags. He pulled a thick manila envelope from his shoulder bag and handed it to me. El plan de Ochoa was almost completely intact, if in a somewhat haphazard order. A cousin of his worked in Secretary Aaron Dychter's office and had made a copy for him. He didn't think this was unethical, he told me, because people had a right to this information. I made several photocopies, too, and sent them to UCIZONI and to other community organizations on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

Just as "nothing happens until it happens, and when it happens, everything happens," this, too, is how things work in Mexico. Formal information channels are blocked, clogged, or simply nonexistent, so information and resources flow through informal passageways, dug in the dark, by hand.