

**TESTIMONY BY EL PASO, TEXAS MAYOR OSCAR LEESER
BEFORE THE
US HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON BORDER AND MARITIME
JULY 16, 2014**

Honorable Chairwoman Miller and Ranking Member Jackson Lee, allow me to start by thanking you for the opportunity to appear before you this morning. I would also like to thank my hometown Congressman, Representative Beto O'Rourke, for inviting me to be here and for his steadfast dedication to the constituents of the 16th District of Texas.

I appreciate the Committee's interest in our nation's international ports of entry and for your commitment to examine how the federal government can prioritize infrastructure investments. I am here today to help shed light on the need for investments at our international ports of entry for the economic security of not only El Paso, but the nation as a whole.

One in every 24 workers in the United States depends on US-Mexico trade for their employment. Chairwoman Miller, more than 175,000 jobs in Michigan alone rely on trade with Mexico, and your state was the third largest exporter of goods to Mexico in 2012.

Taking a quick look at the other states represented here today, Texas, California, South Carolina, Mississippi, and Pennsylvania employ more than 1.5 million people whose jobs rely on trade with Mexico and close to \$120 billion in exports to Mexico.

Lack of investment both in infrastructure and manpower at our ports of entry in El Paso can and will significantly impact business and trade in your state. A lack of investment at our international ports of entry is a lack of investment in your workforce.

One investment that has shown positive results in my community is one that your committee recently examined. Your committee looked outside of the box at how investments could be made at the ports of entry by allowing local communities to apply local funds to assist our federal partners. Unfortunately, for years, there has been a lack of investment at our ports of entry, and local communities want to help by investing in themselves.

Through Section 560 of the 2013 Consolidated Appropriations bill, a pilot program was launched to allow communities like El Paso to help pay for additional overtime for Customs and Border Protection Officers at our international bridges. The City of El Paso was one of five pilot projects chosen for a five year test.

Once the City of El Paso was chosen to partner with CBP, City officials worked closely with our community partners to ensure their buy-in. I personally met with the maquiladora industry to ensure their satisfaction with the project. They understood the return on investment that they would see as a result of decreased wait times at our bridges. Furthermore, a five-year pilot

project reassured them there was enough time to work through any potential issues with new implementation of the program.

Outreach was also conducted to the overall community to ensure those who cross via foot or vehicle knew of the City's investment in helping open additional lanes during peak hours of operations at our bridges. Maquiladora employees, local university students, and shoppers, just to name a few, cross back and forth regularly, and it is important that we make their trips quick and easy.

El Paso City Council formally approved the partnership between the City of El Paso and CBP as well as approved a \$0.50 increase to tolls at our bridges to create a dedicated funding source for the pilot. The City of El Paso's economic security depends on the flow of goods and people across our international ports of entry so it is important not only to ensure trade continues to flow freely but that people and vehicles can move quickly across the border.

The pilot started on January 26th of this year, and since the launch, we have seen very positive results. The City of El Paso has already invested more than \$400,000 for close to 3,500 hours of overtime for the officers. Traffic volumes have increased substantially over the same period last year with an average increase for pedestrians at more than 18 percent, close to 30 percent for vehicles, and more than 3 percent with cargo. Even with volume increases across the board, we are seeing a decrease in wait times. We believe that as the program continues, we will see larger decreases in the bridge times.

Aside from the investment for additional officers at the bridges, in El Paso, there is a need for additional investment in the actual infrastructure. The El Paso-Juarez region is one of the largest bi-cultural border communities in the world that includes more than 2.5 million people. El Paso is ranked among the top 30 largest exporters in the world. With US-Mexico trade totaling more than \$507 billion in 2013, El Paso is a major player in this market with close to \$100 billion of that trade crossing our international ports of entry.

A 30 percent increase in vehicular traffic means that CBP processed 54,000 more vehicles at one bridge for the same one month period over the prior year. Add to this the \$100 billion of that trade annually crosses the El Paso international ports of entry and the strain on our bridges is immense.

In addition, our infrastructure is landlocked and we do not have the ability to add additional lanes to help with additional traffic. We can work together to ensure the lanes are fully staffed at peak times, but there are also a number of infrastructure improvement projects that have been identified to assist. My community, however, is again ready and willing to step to the plate to resolve these issues.

The Section 559 authorization would allow the City of El Paso to make the necessary upgrades to the infrastructure while allowing CBP and GSA to accept the improvements as a donation. The City of El Paso recently submitted a letter of intent to participate in this program, but I do not believe we should have to reapply. CBP should honor the current agreements with

communities who have already showed their commitment to be a partner and allow the opportunity to work under the additional authority as well.

Aside from the Public-Private Partnership agreement in place, it should be noted that the El Paso community continues to show their commitment and desire to invest. Recently, City Council approved the inclusion of several projects in the overall capital investment plan for the city. The City is willing to invest the match dollars to execute large scale projects to decrease wait times and increase trade across the United States. Congress must help our partnering federal agencies by providing the funding for programs such as the Coordinated Border Infrastructure Program.

It is my belief that communities will help make the investment in areas such as this because of the impact lack of resources can ultimately have on a community. I urge you to continue thinking outside of the box for a way to help expedite trade across our country while at the same time investing in additional officers and infrastructure resources that will not only help the El Paso community but the greater US population.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be with you this morning.