

Testimony of David A. Garcia

County Administrator - Cameron County, Texas

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House Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security  
A New Approach to Increase Trade and Security: An Examination of CBP's Public Private Partnerships

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Vela, and Members of the Committee thank you for the opportunity to come before the Border and Maritime Security subcommittee today. For the record, I have provided my testimony to the committee staff and look forward to a constructive discussion on trade and security at our ports of entry.

My name is David Garcia and I serve as the County Administrator in Cameron County. I was born and raised in Brownsville, Texas. I have been working on infrastructure, transportation, economic development, trade and security, and many other projects in the region for many years. I understand the border and its uniqueness. In our region we depend heavily on the ability to move traffic efficiently on a daily basis through our Ports of Entry. We believe strongly in the program to allow for Public Private Partnerships within the Department of Homeland Security Customs and Border Protection as well as other federal agencies in which we can take advantage of opportunities to improve our infrastructure and manpower. Cameron County has a history of working on public private partnerships on a variety of projects. So I thank you for the opportunity to come before you today to share our views from a regional perspective.

From 1995 to 2004, I spent ten years as a senior staffer working on trade and commerce affecting Texas and the country and so it definitely is an honor and a privilege to be here to share my perspective from the local government standpoint. I was also here in the Rayburn Building on 9-11 and worked on the legislation creating the Department of Homeland Security. Fourteen years later it still feels like yesterday. And so I applaud the members of this committee as you continue to improve and authorize programs and objectives of the various agencies comprising DHS. We all recognize that protecting the Homeland is the number one national security priority. For us living on the border it is a difficult balancing act and one that we have to contend with daily.

I want to take a few minutes to talk about our county and some of the exciting things happening in South Texas. It is important to highlight these ongoing initiatives because they go hand in hand with what is being discussed here today. We enjoy great collaboration and communication with Customs and Border Protection as well as the Border Patrol and other law enforcement agencies. Working together we have been able to forge ahead despite all the rules and regulations Post 9-11. For us the Rio Grande River is a like a street with water – it separates two sides that happen to be connected by bridges at various points. The population in the Rio Grande Valley including the major cities south of the border hovers around three (3) million. This is a challenge when many of these people are moving through our Ports of Entry daily.

Specifically, Cameron County sits on the southernmost part of Texas and is bordered by the Gulf of Mexico and the beautiful beaches of South Padre Island on one side and the U.S. Mexico border on the other. Cameron County owns and operates three international bridges: the Veterans Bridge at Los Tomates, the Gateway Bridge in downtown Brownsville and the Free Trade Bridge at Los Indios. There is also a private international bridge (B&M) and the Port of Brownsville seaport Port of Entry. In addition, we recently inaugurated the opening of the first international rail bridge built on the U.S.- Mexico border in over 100 years – a public-private partnership between Cameron County and Union Pacific Railroad along with support from federal and state resources.

Due to the level of improvements not only in Cameron County but along the border and the special operations being conducted regularly, adequate staffing of Customs and Border Protection agents as well as other mission critical agencies at our Ports of Entry is essential. The ability for a Port Director to allocate and shift resources and manpower based on traffic patterns, special events, and potential security issues is a valuable deployment tool in the daily activities surrounding local bridge systems like ours. That is why we support the Reimbursable Services and Donation Acceptance Program. We believe it will be beneficial to us long term.

I applaud the members of our delegation including Representative Vela and Senator Cornyn as well as the members of this committee for providing us with another tool in the toolbox as we continue to improve and modernize our Ports of Entry taking full advantage of these important programs. As we grow and strategically plan our future Port of Entries along the border, it is imperative that we have a reassurance and a level of certainty that will allow us to consider as many options as possible when it comes to staffing and infrastructure.

Cameron County is one of the fastest growing and dynamic regions of the country. We are one of the regions of the country with five modes of transportation: maritime, highway, air, rail and pipeline. And soon we will have a sixth; space travel.

In the next year or so we will see monthly rocket launches when SpaceX begins its operations in early 2017. It is estimated that we will attract upwards of 15,000 visitors per launch creating a Rio Grande Valley Space Corridor similar to Cape Canaveral. Many of these visitors will come from Northern Mexico and we have to be prepared at our international bridges for what most likely will be an influx of legitimate international travelers. Our three Valley airports will also see their fair share of increased activity in the days and hours leading to a launch. The Brownsville South Padre Island International airport, the only 24 hour Customs airport facility, will definitely see an increase in traffic. CBP is among the many federal, state, and local agencies coordinating this effort and we will need support as we move into the next phases of the project.

The Port of Brownsville, also considered the Port of South Texas and the Port of Northern Mexico, is working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to deepen their channel to 52 feet to

attract post Panamex vessels. Already home to the premier offshore rig and platform production company servicing the Gulf of Mexico and to the ship dismantling companies certified by the Maritime Administration and the Department of Defense there is an increased level of activity like never before. The County and the Port of Brownsville are also working together on the potential construction of Liquefied Natural Gas plants along the ship channel. Three companies have permits under review and pending before the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. These multi-billion dollar investments if approved and constructed have the potential to increase the valuation of the county by twenty percent or more.

And just recently the upcoming announcement of a manufacturing plant on the U.S. side in Brownsville has the potential to dramatically increase commercial traffic at our Ports. This project which is backed by a major U.S. company will be another shot in the arm to the local economy. Because of our strategic corridors, proximity to the port, an adjacent rail bridge, as well as our international ports of entry we were an ideal fit and contender. Given this economic growth potential we need to be prepared and continue working with our federal partners to have a plan in place to have the manpower and resources available.

So as we develop and improve our plans along the border we need to take into account the growth on several fronts. For us, we'd like to explore the possibility of CBP manning the commercial operations at one of our Ports of Entry (Veterans Bridge) 24/7. We'd also like to see how we can maximize resources at the only bridge (Free Trade at Los Indios) in South Texas that houses the U.S. Department of Agriculture. If all predictions are correct and if we see an upsurge in traffic due to the fact that shippers can get their fresh produce to market faster by way of the newly constructed Mazatlan to Matamoros highway in Mexico to Texas ports then we need to start the discussion with both CBP and USDA to maximize the potential of this presently under-utilized Port of Entry. Given its history of managing and operating an international bridge system, Cameron County is well positioned to use existing resources and has the ability to find innovative ways to work with Customs and Border Protection and other Department of Homeland Security agencies.

Finally, there is a border master plan that identifies future projects along the U.S.-Mexico border. We have future projects on that list. I would encourage both, Committee staff and agency officials at DHS, to plan proactively as opposed to reactively. I understand the difficulty and challenges in the planning and budget process as more new facilities and bridge expansions get built. But together we need to ensure there is a level of coordination from beginning to end in the development, construction, operations, and maintenance of our Ports of Entry. As we all know the amount of trade in terms of volume and value coming through our borders is in the billions. We cannot afford to ignore the border communities and we need to keep programs like this in place to help keep the viable options available when preparing for the future.

I thank you Chairman Miller for holding this important hearing and I look forward to answering questions from the Committee.