

Rep. Escobar, T&I Testimony

Thank you Chairman DeFazio and Ranking Member Graves. I look forward to taking this opportunity to discuss policy priorities critical to El Paso while you are working towards the reintroduction of H.R. 2.

El Paso is a vibrant border community home to over 800,000 people. It has seen steady growth over the past decade, but our infrastructure spending is not keeping pace. Our highways and bridges are congested and in disrepair, causing issues for locals who rely on them to get to work, go to school, and more. However, infrastructure issues in border communities like mine are not just problems for locals, but for every American. Our roads act as critical trade arteries for the rest of the country, with over 800 billion dollars in trade entering through El Paso's ports of entry alone in 2019. In short, border infrastructure is national infrastructure. While local governments and state agencies like the Texas Department of Transportation have been doing what they can, the federal government needs to step up. That is why I am urging the committee to consider increasing the border set-aside created in the FAST Act for Surface Transportation Program funds from 5 percent to 10 percent in H.R. 2. I am also asking the committee to make this set-aside mandatory for border states. There is a consistent pattern, particularly in Texas, of underinvesting in border infrastructure and instead shifting funding towards other metropolitan centers. I understand that projects in non-border cities are important, but I believe it is just as important to recognize high quality border infrastructure will benefit both those who live on the border and those who do not. We need to give border communities the chance to receive just as much funding as other cities so they can revitalize their economies, better their residents' lives, and enhance their role as key trade pathways for our country.

The other critical element to border infrastructure are our land ports of entry. These ports are just as crucial as their coastal counterparts, with billions in trade crossing by land every day. They also serve a national security interest, with Customs and Border Protection using them to facilitate everyday flow and preventing contraband from crossing our borders. Nevertheless, many of these ports were built in the 20th century and are outdated. Such conditions are impairing CBP's ability to perform their mission, leading to further congestion, wait times, and security concerns. These delays also pose an environmental and health risk for neighborhoods surrounding the ports because the idling cars spew harmful particulates into the air. Local governments are trying to do their part by investing and seeking funding for infrastructure around the ports, such as the Stanton Street Bridge Intelligent Transportation System I am submitting for the committee's consideration under the surface reauthorization process. Yet, because these ports play such a critical role for our national economy, I urge the committee to include a significant investment for inland port infrastructure and technology in H.R. 2 because the federal government has a stake in their success.

Finally, I would like to call the committee's attention to colonias, which exist exclusively along the U.S.-Mexico border. Sometimes referred to as "The Forgotten America", these communities can oftentimes lack suitable roads, access to clean drinking water, and sewage treatment. Last year the House of Representatives moved to include two of my colonia related amendments in the final version of H.R. 2. The first directed the Department of Transportation to conduct a study of colonia infrastructure and the second would have established the Colonia State of Good Repair Grant Program to address colonia surface infrastructure. I am urging the committee

to include these amendments in the coming version of H.R. 2 with one change. The Colonia State of Good Repair Grant Program needs to invest 500 million dollars over four years to make a real dent in the infrastructure needs of colonias across the border.

In addition to surface infrastructure, water infrastructure is desperately needed for all colonias. Based on a recent estimate, El Paso County will need approximately 700 million dollars to address colonia water and wastewater infrastructure. While President Biden's American Jobs Plan contains historic investments in these areas, I am concerned colonias will be left behind or put into programs where they need to compete with other regions for funding. That is why I urge you to set aside water infrastructure funds specifically for colonias and the local governments helming these projects. We must also ensure no local match is needed because putting together a match presents another barrier to access for these already economically disadvantaged communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today and I look forward to collaborating with the committee further on H.R. 2.