

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF JON BARELA, CEO, THE
BORDERPLEX ALLIANCE**

**BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY SUBCOMMITTEE ON BORDER
SECURITY, FACILITATION, AND OPERATIONS ON
APRIL 30, 2019**

Madam Chair and Members of the Committee:

It is a great honor and pleasure for me to testify today before this esteemed committee. The Borderplex Alliance is a nonprofit organization dedicated to economic development and policy advocacy in the El Paso, Texas; Las Cruces, New Mexico; and Cd. Juárez, Chihuahua region.

Located in a gateway for international trade, The Borderplex Alliance is the go-to resource for regional ideas, information, and influence. We are supported by a coalition of over 250 businesses, community and civic leaders, all with a shared vision — bringing new investment and jobs to the Borderplex region and creating a positive business climate.

The Borderplex Alliance provides regional, national, and international development, advocacy, representation, and support to businesses looking to expand their operations within the Borderplex region. The organization also serves as an advocate for the region in state and national capitals, promoting the economic prosperity of the region and the strength of the U.S.-Mexico relationship.

My message today is simple. The U.S. - Mexico border is a dynamic and critical economic driver for the United States. Investing in infrastructure at our ports of entry and prioritizing the facilitation of legitimate trade and travel between the United States and Mexico will pay significant dividends for our economy.

We need a bipartisan, economically prudent approach to legislation impacting the U.S. - Mexico border. Doing so will improve North America's economic competitiveness, help secure the border, and address the migration crisis in a way that treats migrants with dignity and respect while following U.S. law and keeping within the best traditions of our nation. When considering legislation related to the U.S. - Mexico border, please keep in mind these three compelling points.

First, Mexico is an economic and strategic ally of the United States, not a foe. Mexico is currently our 3rd largest goods trading partner. In 2018 the total U.S. goods and services traded with Mexico reached \$671.0 billion. In 2017 Mexico invested \$18.0 billion in the United States. This trade and investment on both sides of the border result in a symbiotic relationship with sophisticated supply chains that route goods back and forth across borders and ultimately to consumers around the world. This trade and investment is not a zero-sum game. It creates jobs, hope, and opportunity on both sides of the border.

In the Midwest, more than 700,000 jobs directly rely on trade with Mexico. Nationally, that figure is between 5 and 6 million. That is why the ratification of United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement is so critical to keeping this fruitful relationship between our great nations. The Borderplex region is at the heart of the relationship and is the gateway of trade for the Americas. El Paso ports saw \$81.9 billion worth of trade in 2018, up 5.1 percent from in 2017. Investing in and modernizing these ports should be a priority to help make wait times more predictable and shorter. It will also make the nation more prosperous.

Second, urgently needed infrastructure improvements not only facilitate legitimate commerce, but it also helps secure the southern frontier. Securing the border and facilitating trade are not mutually exclusive. Every minute \$1 million worth of good and services are traded between the United States and Mexico. As I testify before

you today, delays and unpredictable wait times at our ports of entry are devastating business along the border and across the nation. I've heard from multiple companies operating at 20-50% capacity, waiting 12-24 hours to get their shipments through the ports of entry.

One employer is furloughing hundreds of employees and reducing their hours. This employer is a canary in the coal mine for global supply chains. He is a scrap metal supplier. His goods make their way into auto parts. He tells us that due to the delays in crossing the ports of entry, companies in Mexico are making fewer goods and thus less scrap metal. These conditions create a ripple effect through the national economy that could turn into a tsunami of potential job losses in the United States.

The unpredictable and unacceptably long wait times are causing another member company of the Borderplex Alliance to move jobs from a plant in New Jersey to a facility in Eastern Europe in order to ensure continuity of product availability in the U.S. market. His products are life-saving medical equipment, such as heart stents used in the United States.

The cadence and flow of tractor trailers that travel back and forth between the United States and Mexico, first with raw materials and then with finished goods is part of the rhythm of investment and jobs. Disruptions in trade cause factories to slow or halt production, reduce hours or jobs, and create the conditions that result in emigration from the South to the North.

Long and unpredictable wait times at the ports of entry have been a problem on the border for decades. It is a bipartisan problem that should have been solved years ago. Only now, however, with the threat to shut the southern border, this problem has become a national economic security concern. I suggest Congress use the President's \$5.7 billion funding request for a border wall to:

- Hire more CBP officers;

- Invest in advanced technology at our ports; and
- Increase staffing at our ports during peak hours.

Third, we need a humane, rational, and long-term solution that works for immigrants and U.S. citizens alike. Immigration is a complex, multidimensional issue with economic push and pull factors at its heart. But when as a nation we embrace trade, globalization, and a rules-based international order we can increase opportunity for everyone. I urge the members of this committee to help us address this specific problem locally and more broadly work across the aisle to fix our broken immigration policies on the federal level. Specifically, I believe Congress should:

- Streamline legal immigration;
- Clarify our asylum laws;
- Hire more immigration judges;
- Co-locate immigration processing centers with immigration courts;
- Create a special envoy to the North Triangle Countries to help rebuild civil society and institutions; and
- Work in a multilateral fashion with governments and international organization such as the Organization of American States, and others.

This crisis is creating local challenges as well. Several weeks ago, the federal government issued a request for proposal for a new \$192 million migrant processing center in the Border Patrol El Paso Sector (El Paso County, Hudspeth County and the state of New Mexico). Due to the dramatic spike in asylum seekers from the Northern Triangle of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, and

El Salvador), the processing center is slated to be open as soon as June. While the situation on the ground is urgent, it is paramount that we get this right.

A quick retrofit of a former manufacturing plant will not produce a quality facility that reflects our community's values or those of the hardworking and brave agents and officers of the Border Patrol and Customs and Border Protection. Rather than hastily retrofit a vacant industrial warehouse, the federal government should design and build a new facility, purpose-built, to process migrants. Given the humanitarian crisis, it is possible to move swiftly and construct a custom-built facility. Moreover, while looking for a processing center location, the federal government should consider the entire El Paso Sector, including Hudspeth County, the state of New Mexico, and all of El Paso County. While we recognize the urgent need for a migrant processing center, the solution to this complex problem cannot be another quickly built, ill-conceived facility like the ones reported on by the national media. Neither El Pasoans nor the migrants are well-served by a rushed, reactive response that keeps children in cages and has hundreds of families sleeping on the floor of an empty warehouse. Let's work together to find a better solution.

CONCLUSION

Ladies and gentleman of the committee I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today on this important topic. I want to particularly thank Chairwoman Rice who recently led a congressional delegation to El Paso to see first hand the issues we discussed here today. It has been a pleasure to address you all today, and I look forward to answering your questions.

Thank you.