

Testimony of Eddie Trevino, Jr.
County Judge – Cameron County, Texas
February 7, 2017
House Committee on Homeland Security

“Ending the Crisis: America’s Borders and the Path to Security”

Good morning Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, Congressman Vela, and distinguished Members of the Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to come before each of you today.

General Kelly, thank you for your distinguished service to our great country and thank you for your recent visit to South Texas and the border last week.

I hope your visit was informative and productive and the first of many more to come, to better understand the issues facing our border communities and the rest of the country.

My name is Eddie Trevino, Jr. and I am honored to serve as the County Judge in Cameron County, Texas.

Cameron County borders the Gulf of Mexico and the U.S.-Mexico border and is a part of what is referred to as the Rio Grande Valley, a growing part of the state with approximately 1.5 million people on the U.S. side and an additional 2.5 million across the border in Mexico.

Our county owns and operates three international bridges. Trade and economic activity and commerce are critical to our area.

Life on the border is unique. People, along with goods and services move back and forth on a daily basis.

We are dependent on one another as families go back and forth via our bridges for dining and shopping, for medical visits, to work, to go to school and to do many other social and economic activities.

We are also home to South Padre Island, the premiere tourist destination for many throughout the United States and Northern Mexico.

I am honored and humbled to be before you today. I know you have my full testimony, so today I wanted to try and cover as much as possible with the allotted time given.

Given all the attention over the past several weeks and months on border security, trade, and immigration this committee hearing could not have been timelier.

Border security, immigration and the facilitation of legitimate trade and travel on the U.S.- Mexico border is a reality we live with every day.

The decisions made at the executive and legislative branches of our federal and state governments in the coming weeks, months and years will have long lasting and profound impacts on our communities on both sides of the border.

I hope I can provide some information and context to this Committee and this Administration to first understand and realize how this region impacts the entire state of Texas and our country before making any rash and costly decisions.

As a locally elected official, I have an obligation to try and inform this panel and others involved in the decision-making process to make decisions based upon common sense solutions that will work long term and be effective for all of us.

From 2003 to 2007, almost ten years before I became the County Judge last year, I was the Mayor of Brownsville, Texas and the largest city in the Rio Grande Valley.

I was fortunate to become involved during that timeframe on various issues including advocating for immigration reform and border security.

I was first elected as a City Commissioner in Brownsville two months after 9-11 and saw firsthand the impacts 9-11 had on border security and trade.

On the border, we have had to endure many policies and programs put in place by the federal and state government.

And all of us fully understood the reasoning for the sudden changes to life on the border.

We are a community that believes in the rule of law.

We are a community that cherishes our flag and country.

And we are a community that wants for our nation and world to be safe and secure.

Many of our residents have been on the front lines to answer the call to defend our country in times of war and peace. Unfortunately, we are well represented when it comes to Veterans killed or wounded in action.

And their faith and determination to make this the greatest country on this God given earth cannot be questioned.

But in recent years there has been an evolution and transformation of the border.

During this time, the economies of our nations, the United States and Mexico, have gotten stronger and even more intertwined.

And the coordination and communication dealing with intelligence issues has been beneficial and critical for local law enforcement on both sides of the border.

Despite all the post 9-11 changes, Businesses have thrived, our communities are safe, and the Rio Grande Valley continues to grow and prosper.

The claims of lawlessness and rampant violence in our border communities is just wrong and nothing more than an attempt to paint our community and region as something that it is not in order to support the misguided rhetoric against border communities, the country of Mexico and the immigrant, both legal and undocumented, Hispanics, and in particular, Mexicans.

Data we have from our local police chiefs and county sheriff show that crime has gone down and our communities are safer than ever.

Inner cities have more serious criminal activity than border cities. In Chicago, last year there were 762 murders. In Brownsville, Texas the murder rate was 4 last year and in Harlingen, Texas it was the same.

In spite of the negative attacks, rhetoric, and commentary, there is a strong sense of optimism for our region.

It is because of our people - our most valuable resource and trusted asset – that we continue to thrive and prosper.

People in the business sector, our educational system, and our men and women in law enforcement have made the Rio Grande Valley a great and safe place to live, work, and play.

Because of this and because of what we know we can accomplish, I come before you today to implore you to seek other alternatives and opportunities other than the Border Wall proposal put forth by President Trump.

Contrary to what has been proposed, the border wall concept is ineffective and creates a false sense of security that will do nothing to alleviate the problem with the criminal element, drug cartels, gangs and other organizations looking to harm the country and our people.

In fact, as a result of the Secure Fence Act of 2006, there is already border fencing in place in the Rio Grande Valley covering 54 miles in Cameron and Hidalgo Counties.

If you have lived and worked on the border, you have seen firsthand the decline in crime, the increase in opportunity, and the understanding and commitment of both governments to work together.

I for one can tell you that it is better. Our federal partners have the tools necessary to do their jobs effectively and efficiently and because there are more boots on the ground, the detection and response time has improved.

As a local elected official, our county sheriff and local law enforcement have a great working relationship with Customs and Border Protection and Border Patrol.

The men and women on the front lines do an unbelievable job with the resources they have. We must do all that we can to continue to help them in their mission but not at the expense of our relationship with our country's 2nd largest trading partner and Texas's largest trading partner, Mexico.

Because of what they do, our communities along the border have become safer. With this in mind, no one disputes the fact that we need to uphold the rules and laws of our nation to continue keeping us safe.

But understandably, we also have to continue growing our economy, ensuring this country's long term sustainability with an ample and dedicated labor pool, and doing it in a way that embraces the ideals and principles of this great nation.

Collectively, there are still many things that can be done to improve border security and give our people the tools they need to be ahead of the game.

This will not work by developing a one size fits all approach such as a Border Wall. We need to be innovative and have a strategy to fix our problem.

Utilizing a 14th century solution to address a 21st century problem makes no sense, especially as it is the most expensive of all possible alternatives or solutions.

If we provide a wall of technology utilizing cameras, sensors, and other state of the art technology, we arm our federal law enforcement personnel with the necessary and proven resources they need to perform their jobs and duties.

Operational control is paramount.

Improving road conditions along the border, removing barriers like the Carrizo Cane and Salt Cedar and other invasive non-native plants that provide smugglers havens and cover, and allowing for more lateral mobility on federal lands along the border, will give agents a better chance at controlling and surveilling the border.

Just recently, I learned that the technology investments in border security made 20 years ago in the Brownsville Sector have not been improved or upgraded. The cameras and equipment bought and implemented in 1997, while still operational and beneficial, have not been replaced or updated.

Why would we want to saddle our taxpayers with billions of dollars to build a wall?

Doesn't it make more sense to use that money to deploy our most formidable technology and to upgrade our existing technology infrastructure?

Not only would we save money, spending millions instead of billions, but we could utilize methods and technology that have already proven successful.

We must invest in the latest and the greatest technology such as deploying Unmanned Aerial Vehicles to have eyes in the sky.

We must take an approach that utilizes our most valuable resource, which is our people to operate and man the intelligence centers that can watch and detect illegal activity and then direct personnel to the trouble spots before, rather than after, an event or incident has occurred.

Just imagine being able to invest the \$15 to \$40 billion dollars estimated that it will take to build the Wall on equipment, training, technology, road infrastructure, and more boots on the ground.

If you ask the experts in the field, they will tell you that this is where the money should go.

The natural barrier of the Rio Grande River can also work as an advantage for our national security.

In Brownsville, there have been extensive studies undertaken on a Weir Dam project by the Brownsville Public Utilities Board. The opportunity to construct a weir dam using Border Wall dollars or infrastructure fund dollars is a win-win.

This project would broaden the reach, width, and surface area of the river making it much more difficult to cross.

In addition, a weir dam could be coupled with sensors, cameras, and the eradication of non-native plant species along the river banks to add security layers to enhance the efforts of the border patrol.

And once illegal immigrants are detained, there needs to be a commitment of additional financial resources to the judiciary to address their processing.

The current backlog of half a million cases is unacceptable.

The judicial system is undermanned and underfunded. There are not enough Immigration Judges to handle these cases.

People should not be left in limbo in our judicial system for hundreds of days until there is some sort of resolution.

That is not fair to them and it is not fair to our communities.

I want to take a moment to also touch on the need for a policy that addresses America's need for workers.

All nations are built on a foundation of growth. If a nation does not grow, our destiny and way of life will be beyond our control.

Despite what many say or want to believe, low skilled workers are desperately needed in our country.

Some estimates I've seen, state that the U.S. will need between 600 to 650,000 workers annually to keep our economy growing.

The U.S. birth rate has fallen to 1.9 births per female and it is established that a country, just to sustain itself must have a birth rate of 2.1 births per female.

Today, the largest part of our workforce comes from the millennial generation and there are not many millennials interested or committed to low skilled type labor.

The jobs that are needed are not the ones that middle or upper middle class workers will want anyway.

The lack of human capital for so-called basic jobs in this country is something we should all be concerned about if we want our country to prosper and continue to grow.

On the issue of trade and a so called border tax, I do hope that this issue is studied in a more objective and rational manner.

Do we want the price of foods and services to skyrocket?

Do we want to put small businesses in Texas and the rest of the Southwest out of business because of the undue competitive disadvantages these policies will cause?

An eye for an eye policy will leave all of us blind!

Bilateral discussions regarding the long term economic viability of the border region are extremely important to our future, not only in Texas but throughout the entire country.

As a local elected official, I know the importance of economic development and job opportunities for our citizens.

And as Governor Abbott said last week while on a South Texas border tour with General Kelly, "we want to achieve safety and security, but we also want to promote economic development". He also noted that Mexico is Texas' largest trading partner adding that, "we must ensure we are able to continue that very effective trade."

We know there are certain parts of the nation that do need help and do need assistance to spur economic growth.

But we cannot put forward ideas that strain our communities and push us back even further educationally and economically.

Any proposal that is debated and approved by this Congress should improve our economic conditions throughout the entire nation and not do anything to impact its success.

Doing it on the backs of South Texas and U.S.-Mexico border communities is not a viable option.

Historically, the Rio Grande Valley has been one of, if not the poorest areas in our country.

We've made great strides as a result of NAFTA and the investments in our local school districts and institutions of higher learning such as the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, Texas Southmost College, Texas State Technical College and South Texas Community College.

Conversely, along the border there have been sizeable investments made by local communities in partnership with the federal and state government to modernize our Ports of Entry.

Millions of dollars are being invested to build bridges, modernize technology and man our ports. The goods and services moving through these ports make their way to all parts of the entire country.

Again, investing in upgrading and updating our Ports of Entry infrastructure would better serve to enhance our Border Security.

I believe that the President's Infrastructure plan can help play a role with many of our local projects along the border.

Finally, we have come so far in the last twenty years since the passage of NAFTA. There have been many achievements and cooperative agreements to improve bilateral relations.

Destroying the groundwork of so many who had the vision for Free and Secure Trade and taking us back in time and reversing these economic accomplishments is a recipe for disaster.

If the Trump Administration wants to make changes to trade agreements, border security, and immigration policy, there are diplomatic channels to get the job done.

Any negotiations to improve NAFTA don't have to be difficult or adversarial; but they must and should be respectful and mutually beneficial.

It appears that President Trump is unlike other past Presidents and tends to draw upon unconventional wisdom and his hard charging manner. Sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn't.

Recently, I was at a border summit of elected and business officials from all sides of the political spectrum and the theme and message was the same.

What can we do to better the border? How can we improve the ideas and suggestions coming from Washington? How can we tell our story of the farmer, the restaurant owner, the construction company, the professor, the hospital, and countless others that will be affected with such stringent and consequential proposals?

I can tell you that many of my Republican friends are worried. This proposal to build the wall, to renegotiate NAFTA and not address immigration reform will have lasting effects across our country and it will take every bit of effort to fix it.

I ask that you stay apprised of the bilateral negotiations and do all that you can to keep our neighbor and ally on our side, working with us to improve conditions both for the United States and Mexico.

History will judge us on our actions. We must build on our successes by continuing to build bridges and not tear down or divide what we have achieved together with expensive and outdated proposals.

Thank you.