



**Keeping the Border Both Secure and Sustainable  
The Need to Build Bridges Not Walls**

**Testimony  
Of**

**The Honorable Raul Salinas  
MAYOR  
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**BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON BORDER AND MARITIME SECURITY  
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION – LAREDO AND PORT HURON—MIRRORS OF EACH OTHER**

Chairwoman Miller, Ranking Member Cuellar, and Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Raul Salinas. I have the honor of serving as the mayor of Laredo, Texas. I am grateful to you for inviting me to share with you the following messages from Laredo:

- What is homeland security to the nation is hometown security to those of us on the border.
- Securing our borders must be done in a manner that does not close them to trade and community. We recommend building bridges of commerce and friendship, and by employing technology and creativity to achieve enhanced security.
- We would respectfully remind the Congress that a border is not a turnstile. Obligations run in both directions and the US has an obligation to our neighbors to the south to slow, if not stop, the flow of illegal guns, drug money and stolen cars.
- Federal funding for homeland security:
  - Should be based on threat; not the type of a port or the size of a community; and
  - Should compensate local communities that are providing protection and service to the nation and not be based.

## **2. PORT LAREDO AND PORT HURON—MIRRORS OF EACH OTHER**

It is refreshing that this Subcommittee seeks border voices to offer suggestions on how best to balance the twin goals of achieving security while promoting commerce and community. But I am not surprised. Reading the background of Chairwoman Miller, it becomes clear. You are a former local elected official from a community that appears to be Laredo's northern cousin.

Port Huron's Blue Water Bridge sounds a great deal like our bridges in Laredo. The Blue Water Bridge can handle up to 6,000 trucks on its busiest days, while in Laredo we average just over 11,000 trucks a day. (That number is down from 13,000 trucks a day just two short years ago. While many in the nation eagerly await the Dow Jones Industrial Average's return to 13,000 – I think the better barometer for economic recovery is when Laredo hits 13,000 trucks.)

Like Port Huron, Laredo is also a busy railhead. Recent Federal Rail Administration statistics list Port Huron as the leading northern rail port, while Laredo is the leading southern rail port.

I would say that with Laredo's Congressman Henry Cuellar as the Ranking Member, the nation has the two great leaders heading this committee. This Subcommittee can appreciate our message. While others talk about homeland security – We seek hometown security.

A traditional greeting in Laredo is "Me Case – Su Casa." Or "My house is your house." Laredo, and I suspect Port Huron, would respectfully remind all, that your borders are our homes.

### **3. THE TWO LAREDOS AND THE ROLE WE PLAY ON THE BORDER**

Laredo is at the center of the primary trade route connecting Canada, the United States, and Mexico. We are the gateway to Mexico's burgeoning industrial complex. Laredo and Nuevo Laredo, our sister city, offer markets, business opportunities, and profit potential which business and industry simply cannot find anywhere else. We are the fastest growing city east of the Rocky Mountains.

Los Dos Laredos are actually one community divided by a river. Originally settled by the Spaniards in 1755, Laredo/Nuevo Laredo became the first "official" port of entry on the U.S./Mexico border in 1851. Now, the Laredo Customs District handles more trade than all the ports of Southern California, Arizona, New Mexico and West Texas combined, and our role will only grow as we are strategically positioned at the convergence of Mexico's primary highway and railroad leading from Central America through Mexico City, Saltillo and Monterrey, the industrial heart of Mexico. At Laredo these thoroughfares of commerce meet with two major U.S. rail lines and Interstate 35.

Also, because so much of the nation's automotive and electronics inventory flows through Port Laredo, it is estimated that a closing of Port Laredo for just a day would result in economic disruption in those two vital industries.

### **4. LAREDO'S RIVER VEGA – CREATIVE SOLUTION**

Laredo believes that we should be building bridges of commerce and friendship, not walls to community and trade. One should not confuse this message, however, to say that security is not necessary.

Before the people of Laredo honored me with their votes as mayor, I spent a career in law enforcement. During that time the idea of community policing took hold. The idea was that security is a concern for all, and enforcement need not be a punitive act, but an act of community enhancement.

Today Laredo offers that same philosophy in response to any proposal for a border wall/fence with a program we call the River Vega proposal. We understand that there is a need for border security, but we refuse to believe that such security can only be achieved by means of a wall that divides our community not unlike that wall that once divided Berlin. Like Port Huron, Laredo is blessed with a river that provides a natural boundary between our selves and our colleagues across the river. Laredo suggests that rather than a wall, we embrace the natural boundary of the river and create a river walk or what we call our River Vega. A River Vega will stand as a shield against those that would harm the citizens on either shore. Because the wall-like foundation of the River Vega serves as a river beautification project to support lighted parks and walkways, it will say to our partners to the South, that our river and community are shared gifts that should be celebrated. It will also say to those that would harm us that God has provided a wonderful border that can be harnessed to preserve security.

### **5. FUNDING SHOULD BE ADDRESSED TO NEEDS**

Despite being the largest southern port; and the 6<sup>th</sup> largest Customs District in the United States<sup>1</sup>-- Laredo is not entitled to any direct federal funding under any of Homeland Security program. We move more products by truck and rail than any land port and more products than any land/seaport with the exceptions of New York, Los Angeles, Houston, New Orleans and Detroit. But, because the federal government has chosen to distribute its homeland security funds based on population, or if the community is a water port, Laredo receives none.

We are honored to be in the company of Los Angeles, New York, Houston, Detroit and New Orleans. But Laredo cannot meet the definition of a sea port for DHS funds and Laredo is but 1/25<sup>th</sup> the size of the smallest of these MSAs. We therefore miss out on both pots of homeland security funding: UASI funds and port funds. Despite the heroic efforts of Rep. Cuellar, it seems that Washington has failed to get the message that homeland security starts at the border, and that trade volume, which can represent threat level, ought to be the funding factor – not whether a port is on the water or in a big city.

Despite the lack of funding from the Federal government, Laredo stands guard on the border. We reinforce federal law enforcement, partner in responding to chemical and biological threats and support the nation's commerce. Federal funding for homeland security should compensate local communities that are providing protection to the nation. The easiest way to accomplish this goal is to create a border category in all funding formulas.

## **6. HEALTH CHALLENGES**

While I assume the intent of this hearing is to address traditional threats we face at the border, I would like to raise the additional threat of an intentional or unintentional medical or biological attack. In Laredo we say: "When Nuevo Laredo, Mexico coughs, Laredo gets the cold." Disease does not respect a border, a wall or even the most professional of custom and border patrol agents.

When you think of the potential public health threats that can cause epidemics, contaminate our water or food supply, there is no area more vulnerable than the US-Mexico Border. In Laredo, we are proud to provide a first line of defense for our community and the nation. For example, during the world-wide Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) threat, there were five (5) mainland Chinese nationals that entered the United States illegally through the Freer, Texas border post. The Customs and Border Patrol called us in Laredo to inform us that two of Chinese nationals had a fever. (Please note, it was not a Laredo Border crossing but individuals in Freer, Texas, an hour's drive away.) We responded and conducted a rapid and immediate thorough investigation, instituting quarantine and isolation procedures for the prevention and protection of all. This effort included a response to protect over 30 federal agents, 25 Mexican and Central Americans (caught with the Chinese) as well the wellbeing of all Laredoans. We also had to deal with federal and state health and immigration authorities from both countries. The City of Laredo Health Department (CLHD) made it our immediate responsibility to assure the protection of all and the disease containment to prevent a potential spread of a highly communicable disease that could have impacted the nation.

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<sup>1</sup> Laredo trails only Los Angeles, New York, Houston, Detroit, and New Orleans in total value of trade conducted and is the only pure land port in the top 10.

While I think we can all agree this was the responsibility of federal authorities, Laredo alone was able to respond.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

I seek to deliver a simple, but important, message. We must make our borders safe, but not close them to trade and community. The Nation must be dedicated to enhancing the security of our borders, but that commitment must be made with a concurrent commitment to ensuring that our borders continue to operate efficiently in moving people and goods. In Laredo we think that can be summoned up in another simple statement: We need to build bridges of commerce, not walls. Finally, Laredo, and I suspect Port Huron, hope that all in congress like the two leaders here today appreciate that local voices must be part of the solution. For while it is the Nation's border you seek to secure, they are our homes.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to answering your questions.