



**Keeping the Border Secure and Sustainable: A
Balanced Approach to Potential Threats Posed by
Cross-Border Trade By Truck**

Comments of
The Honorable

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**BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
TRANSPORTATION SECURITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE
PROTECTION**

**COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Chairwoman Jackson-Lee, Ranking Member Lungren and Members of the Subcommittee, good afternoon. I am Raul Salinas, the mayor of Laredo, Texas.

It was a great honor for me last summer, as one of my first official duties as the Mayor of Laredo, to welcome a delegation of the United States Congress, including Chairwoman Jackson-Lee, to Laredo for a hearing on border security. Madam Chair, we were honored to have you in Laredo and we are grateful that you heard our plea that border communities be involved in border policy debates. As I said then, while the issue of border security is of national significance, for us on the border, border security means a safe and operational border.

Before offering my testimony, you will all forgive me if I brag just a little about our hometown hero, your colleague, Congressman Cuellar. We could not be more proud of his leadership here in Congress as a subcommittee chair of the Homeland Security Committee.

I would also like to share with the Subcommittee that my first two jobs as an adult were here in Washington. I was a legislative aide to Representative Kika de la Garza and later joined the Capitol Hill Police Force while earning my degree at Maryland. After graduating from Maryland, I also graduated from the Capitol Police Department to a career in the FBI, the last five years of which were spent as an attaché in Mexico City. You can only imagine how much pride I take in testifying today on behalf of my adopted home, in the city that gave me my professional start.

2. LOS DOS LAREDOS AND THE ROLE WE PLAY ON THE BORDER

Madam Chair, I am here to deliver a very simple, but important message. We must make our borders safe, but not close them to trade and community. While the nation must be dedicated to enhancing the security of our borders, 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 a simple statement. We need to build bridges, not walls.

Laredo is at the center of the primary trade route connecting Canada, the United States and Mexico. Laredo and Nuevo Laredo, “Los Dos Laredos” offer markets, business opportunities and profit potential which business and industry simply cannot find anywhere else. We were the first “official” Port of Entry on the U.S./Mexico border in 1851 and today are the largest Customs District on the Southern Border. Today, Laredo handles more trade than all the other ports on the southern border combined. Let me repeat that statement so that you understand that it is not a typo. Laredo handles more trade than all the other ports on the southern border combined.

We are not only the largest southern port; we are the 4th largest Customs District in the United States. We move more products by truck and rail than all the land and water ports in the United States with the exceptions of New York, Los Angeles-Long Beach and Detroit. While we

are honored to be in their company, Laredo is 1/25th the size of the smallest of these other MSAs. Also, unlike these other three ports, and many others that handle far less freight than my community, Laredo is not entitled to any direct federal funding under any of Homeland Security program.

3. TRENTON TO THE CAPITOL BUILDING EVERY DAY

So how many trucks need to traverse Laredo to carry that much freight?

According to the Laredo Development Foundation, whose statistics are attached to my testimony, last year more than 1 million LOADED trucks traveled northbound from Mexico into the US, and more than 1.2 million LOADED trucks traveled from the US into Mexico. The total number of truck trips is estimated at just over 3 million trips, as not all trucks are LOADED. Those numbers translate into 13,000 truck trips every business day traveling in one direction or the other through my city.

Allow me to provide some kind of visual for you to understand just how many trucks trips we are discussing. If you line the 13,000 trucks end to end, assuming a 70 foot length, it would equal a convoy that is more than 172 miles long. It would stretch from the Capitol building to Trenton, New Jersey. And that is what we deal with every day. If you line up the 3 million truck trips between the two countries, it would be a convoy that would stretch just short of 45,000 miles. That would be the same as having a convoy that would circumnavigate the equator just short of twice. That's a long 2 lane highway.

4. THE NUMBERS ARE AN ISSUE

These 13,000 trucks have all the same problems as trucks in your community, its just that there are so many more. That many fully loaded trucks add congestion to our streets, accelerate the erosion of our streets, and yet we are not eligible for highway funds based upon their presence in our community.

The job of policing these trucks after they leave the customs zone is the responsibility of my police force, including whether the drivers are licensed and insured as well as whether the trucks are safe. Again, it's not that these trucks are any better or worse than the trucks you find in your communities; it's just that there are so many more and our resources are so limited.

In addition to the number of trucks, we must also be concerned with what the trucks are carrying. There are the security concerns regarding illegal paraphernalia such as drugs and counterfeit goods. But there are also legal goods that also pose a threat to my community. My police, fire and health department must deal with these 13,000 daily potential threats once they leave customs. The level of hazmat training and equipment that may be found in my city is far greater than you will find in any city of comparable size because of the threats we face on a daily basis. Yet, today, under DHS programs, because the border is not a threat criterion, and because our population does not meet the UASI threshold, Laredo can make no claim to direct federal funding for this enhanced threat level. Nor is Laredo being reimbursed for the services we provide to the nation.

And while that may sound like an extraordinary number of trucks blocking Laredo streets, and polluting Laredo's air – unless we are able to obtain relief from “at grade” railroad crossings, trucks are preferable to trains for in my community for moving freight. For while trucks may slow down traffic, trains requiring inspections split the city in half requiring my first responders to have standing contingency plans for ambulance runs and fire response as there are times you cannot physically get to the closest hospital or have the closest fire station respond because a train has bifurcated the city..

5. THE NEED FOR LOCAL INPUT

While I was asked to focus my testimony on the issue of cross border freight shipments, I would like to take a moment to reiterate our most fervent wish. As Congress seeks solutions to border issues, it is best to do so in consultation with the officials on the border that will have to live with the decisions you make. More importantly, it is the local government officials and our professional staffs that will be your allies in achieving the shared mission of border security.

For instance, the mission statement for Laredo's four bridges reflects this balancing act. In Laredo we seek “To Serve as the most convenient and safe crossing point for all citizens and tourists of both U.S. and Mexico, as well as to facilitate the crossing of all freight and import-export trade that utilizes the Port of Laredo.”

6. SUGGESTED STEPS

With all my years of service to homeland security, I feel very confident that my credibility is sufficient to state that this nation can be safer without closing or slowing our borders. Let me give you but four simple ideas of how the Congress might enhance national security here in Laredo while promoting efficient borders.

- **Port Grants Must be Available to Land Ports**

Just yesterday the Department of Homeland Security announced a new round of funding availability for port security. As I explained above, Laredo is the nation's largest inland port and is number 4 in terms of freight moved for all ports, land or sea. Still, Laredo does not qualify for this port funding because we are not a seaport. The Committee would provide great leadership in helping address this shortcoming. I am sure my colleagues in Detroit and Buffalo would concur with my pleas for assistance.

- **Prioritize International Bridges in National Asset Database**

According to the Congressional Research Service, “The Office of Infrastructure Protection (OIP) in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has been developing and maintaining a National Asset Database. The Database contains information on over 77,000 individual assets, ranging from dams, hazardous materials sites, and nuclear power plants to local festivals, petting zoos, and sporting good stores.” It is Laredo's understanding that with just in time inventories, should the port

of Laredo be closed for any reason, the national economies of both Mexico and the United States would feel the impact in a day, perhaps as soon as 2 hours of closing.

- **UASI Criteria to Include Border Communities**

The Department of Homeland Security has created the Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) program with the stated goal of making grants for law enforcement terrorism prevention efforts. The grants also seek to enhance fire departments' response to terrorism and other major incidents. The criterion for funding used by the DHS, however, has failed to recognize what this Committee already knows -- Investments made in border communities may be the best investments the nation can make. Because of the current criteria, Laredo has never been a direct recipient of UASI funds. We would welcome this Committee's leadership in seeking to amend the funding formulae of UASI programs.

- **Have Federal Government Bear Fair Share of Border Service**

Recognize the benefits derived by creating a border port entry are not limited to the port itself; the entire country benefits as well. Congress should reject a recent any initiatives to require local entities to construct and donate to the General Service Administration (GSA), the federal facilities at new border ports of entry.

- **Fund COPS and Provide Emphasis on Border**

With the assistance of the U.S. Department of Justice COPS program, the Laredo Police Department has hired approximately 155 police officers to focus on community policing issues, which many times are in fact border security issues. The added personnel have enabled the LPD to implement the philosophy at a citywide level and establish the foundation of COPS. The COPS program has been underfunded or subject to earmark only appropriation for the last number of years and Laredo has not been a continuing beneficiary, despite our ongoing service to the nation.

- **U.S./Mexico Border Health Region with Dedicated Funds**

While I am very proud of the Federal, state and local law enforcement officers on the border, there are times that I believe the most important homeland security officer on the border may be Dr. Hector Gonzalez, the head of the City of Laredo's health department. When Washington was caught in the gripe of the anthrax scare, our Health Department was asked to examine envelopes with powdery substances from both sides of the border. We had the SARs threat in Laredo, and I fear that next major biological threat will also be addressed here. Yet, it is the citizens of Laredo alone that fund Dr. Gonzalez' efforts. This Committee's leadership to create a U.S. Mexico Border health resources program to address public health, emerging disease control and prevention services would be of great service to the nation

These are just a few of our ideas on how the Committee may provide leadership on the issue of border security while enhancing economic development.