

SENATE COMMITTEE ON INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT AND
SECURITY
JOINT HEARING WITH THE HOUSE TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE
MAY 4, 2004 - 08:30 AM
CAPITOL EXTENSION BLDG., RM. E1.028, AUSTIN

REMARKS BY MAYOR JOE WARDY
CITY OF EL PASO
amended

For the record, my name is Joe Wardy, Mayor of the City of El Paso.

Chairmen, Members of the committee, first of all I would like to thank Chairman Staples and Chairman Krusee for holding this joint hearing and allowing me the opportunity to testify on this important matter. I would also like to personally acknowledge Senator Shapleigh and Representative Pickett for their continued support and ongoing efforts in improving our transportation infrastructure.

My remarks will be brief and to the point, focusing on the use of toll roads along our Texas-Mexico border at El Paso. Let me be clear that I am not against the Governor's Trans-Texas Corridor Plan. I am fully supportive of the plan's intent and recognize the important role toll roads play in financing the 4000-mile corridor.

International trade plays an ever-increasing role in our state's economy. Over 80 percent of all US-Mexico trade moves by truck, and over half of that crosses through our state's border. In El Paso alone we see over 9 million pedestrian crossings and over 16 million vehicle crossings in any given year. Goods once available only in border communities are now sold in stores from Lubbock to Longview.

With that brief background, I'd like to get into the issue before this committee today, toll roads. Let me make one point clear, I am not against toll roads in Texas. They do work in certain areas and are the future for Texas. During 25 years worth of experience in the trucking industry and years of involvement in transportation infrastructure planning, I have learned enough to know they work in certain cases. I believe the Governor's plan is sound and will relieve congestion in many parts of the state and fund badly needed infrastructure projects. Throughout Texas, severe congestion in large urban areas such as Austin, Dallas, and Houston continue to plague motorists. Yet to consider the transportation needs and capacity of El Paso in the same category as Austin, Houston or Dallas is unrealistic and unfair.

It is my opinion that toll roads do not best serve the transportation needs of the El Paso region at this time. This region does not yet have the basic transportation infrastructure to meet the traffic and commerce needs mostly imposed by

NAFTA, nor the economy to support the use of toll roads. Texas has more border crossings into Mexico than any other state, yet much of the infrastructure is inadequate to handle the increasing volume of trade with Mexico. Texas bridges and border crossings, some of the busiest in the U.S., are already operating at capacity. Simply put, many communities were not and are still not able to handle the large increase in traffic created by NAFTA and continue to be ill prepared.

When I use the term “ basic infrastructure”, it would include the completion of Loop 375 to bypass downtown El Paso, taking much of the traffic clogging I-10 with it. This project is long overdue, given that I-10 is our only major east-west corridor, completed in 1969, and it supports a large volume of NAFTA traffic. On several occasions, we have seen I-10 crippled by accidents or flooding, and, with no alternative route around the City, everything simply stops. We have no viable alternative routes. This is not acceptable. We are just now beginning to benefit from NAFTA-related transportation funding, almost 10 years after NAFTA began. Projects that are commonplace and long existing in other cities have yet to be completed in El Paso. Yet the state wants border communities to pay for basic infrastructure when other communities have not had to pay for similar projects.

It is clear that our El Paso roads have not kept up with the pace of NAFTA, or the rest of much of Texas for that matter. According to a Dallas Federal Reserve Report, “...because of the rapid growth in truck traffic and its concentration on major arteries, the border may need even greater spending to reduce congestion and the associated social costs.” According to these findings, the current rate of border transportation infrastructure development will not meet the needs of future trade expansion and population growth. As industry outpaces the number of highways and customs booths, border cities are becoming bottlenecks, chasing away tourism, diminishing the quality of life for border residents, and crippling the Texas economy.

Expecting border states or cities to finance NAFTA related border infrastructure is akin to requiring border states to finance the border patrol and immigration service. We should not bear the brunt of NAFTA infrastructure given the rewards for such infrastructure are enjoyed throughout the state and country. In fact, economists have noted that a shortfall in public works amounts to a "third deficit," after budget and trade imbalances. To transfer investment in border infrastructure to a population that can ill-afford it is to hinder production and shipping, weakening the economy.

For these reasons I believe that TX-DOT should be looking at a tiered level of application for their toll road program: Metro, Rural and Border. TX-DOT should re-classify its criteria for evaluating new road construction to take into account population density, average income in a region and the level of existing infrastructure development. Congestion in border cities and rural communities is not the same as large urban areas. El Paso, as the largest border city in the

nation, may need toll roads in the future, but not at present with our lack of basic infrastructure. I do believe that once El Paso has several basic transportation components in place, we can contribute to the advancement of Texas mobility through the development of tolled expansion projects in our community. It is with this in mind that I strongly urge you to take these factors into consideration, consistent with TX-DOT policy, when implementing the toll aspects of the plan.

Thank you for your time. I stand ready to answer any questions you may have.