



VERONICA ESCOBAR

El Paso County Judge

April 7, 2011

I have the honor of being the County Judge for El Paso, Texas, the greatest community in the U.S. In Texas, the County Judge is the Chief Executive of the County. In this administrative capacity, I preside over a five-member commissioners court, which has budgetary and administrative authority over county government operations. The County Judge is elected county-wide. That means, as of the 2010 Census, I represent 800,000 people in the world's largest bi-national metropolitan community.

El Paso also happens to be the safest city of our size in America, and we've consistently been ranked among the top three safest communities for well over a decade. Not only do we have some of the lowest crime rates in the nation, but a recent poll of our citizens shows that we know we are safe and we feel safe.

I appreciate the opportunity to share the border experience with all of you. It's sometimes frustrating when policies created and laws passed in D.C. do not address the realities that border residents live.

Residents who live on the U.S.-Mexico Border have seen their communities used as a convenient backdrop to heated debates and political posturing about immigration and drug policies. Incredibly, it's been said by some elected officials—two from our own state—that there are bombs going off in the streets of El Paso. That is absolutely untrue. As a border community, we have challenges, no doubt, but exploding bombs are not among them.

What happens when the rhetoric escalates and the facts get lost? It hurts my local economy; it hurts our ability to recruit talent; it negatively affects our convention business; and it doesn't solve the real problems.

We are all concerned about and devastated by the tragedies occurring every day on the other side of our river – the drug war raging on the streets of Ciudad Juárez. I am glad for the assistance being given Mexico, and I hope there is more to come, including discussions about our own contributions to the drug war that is devastating Juárez and El Paso families. In the mean time illegal drugs continue to flow north to feed Americans' insatiable appetite for them; U.S. guns used in that bloodshed continue to move south; and El Paso, like other border cities, is a corridor caught in the middle of that north/south activity as well as the rhetoric that emanates from our state's and nation's capitols.

My local law enforcement agents are dealing with transnational gang activity; my jail houses them; our prosecutors are pursuing charges against them in court; and my local property tax base is shouldering much of that burden.

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The federal government has been aware of the costs associated with the challenges we face on the border and the burden carried by local property taxpayers; your financial assistance is very much appreciated, especially through the State Criminal Alien Assistance Program (SCAAP) and High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) funds. However, according to the El Paso County Sheriff's Office, HIDTA funds have remained relatively stable since the program's inception over 10 years ago. Meanwhile, salaries, benefits and equipment costs have all increased over time; we either have to scale back operations or fund increases on the backs of local property taxpayers. SCAAP funds are also very much appreciated but only cover a small portion (10-15%) of the costs of housing these offenders. And, unfortunately, in the 2012 budget, SCAAP funds are being reduced by 60%, which would mean yet another increased burden on my residents.

Federal grants offer a supplement that we appreciate, but they can be inflexible. For example, the 2010 Operation Stonegarden grant did not allow us to purchase vehicles, which we badly needed. That significantly diminishes our capacity to effectively patrol the County of El Paso, which consists of over 1,060 square miles, 47 miles of which are adjacent to our international border.

We need help with investments that supplement our ability to recruit and hire more officers. The COPS grants have poured money into Texas but the El Paso County Sheriff's Office has been passed over for two years. The El Paso Police Department likewise has been ignored. Meanwhile cities like San Antonio, Dallas, Houston, and Austin have received funding for as many as 50 new officers. These are not border cities. Let me repeat: These are not border cities. My Sheriff's office needs "boots on the ground." While receiving funding for overtime is helpful, our officers are getting burned out.

We are concerned that with the talk of slashing budgets and cutting support to our communities, we will erode the gains we have made in getting the federal government to assist us as we assist you.

When the war between cartels began to reach a critical level in Ciudad Juárez, we saw a pattern emerge that we never predicted and hasn't stopped. Our county hospital district, which houses the only Level 1 trauma center in our region—the next closest center is 275 miles away—began seeing victims of the violence who were rushed through our ports of entry and into our ER. Since 2008, we've spent \$4.9 million in trauma care specifically for these victims; to date, we've been compensated for only \$1.2 million, leaving local property taxpayers to pick up \$3.7 million in uncompensated costs. We've repeatedly requested funding from the Merida initiative to help off-set the costs borne by local property taxpayers because we just don't see that financial burden diminishing – unless the U.S. changes its drug policies or the cartels suddenly declare a cease fire.

Where has some of the federal funding gone, if not to my trauma facility or increasing my law enforcement capacity? It's gone to a wall. While federal law enforcement has gone on the record to praise the border wall, it is to me and others an example of considerable federal dollars being spent on a rusting monument that makes my community look like a junk-yard.

The vast majority of border crossers are not criminals, but economic migrants; and as you know, a significant amount of illegal drugs are funneled through our ports of entry.

A true fix to undocumented immigration could come from comprehensive immigration reform that would create a path for the undocumented to regularize their status, institute migrant worker visas, and, in general, offer a realistic, common-sense approach to a complicated challenge. And comprehensive immigration reform will finally take away the platform used by state politicians who want local police and sheriffs departments to enforce federal immigration laws. For the record, the El Paso County Sheriff, the El Paso Police Chief, the El Paso Mayor, Congressman Reyes and I all oppose having local law enforcement officers enforce federal immigration laws.

Community policing, the strategy utilized so effectively by local law enforcement in El Paso, involves building trust and relationships between law enforcement and citizens that helps solve crimes and keep neighborhoods crime-free. If my sheriff's deputies are required by the Texas legislature to enforce federal immigration laws, and if they become de-facto immigration officers, that trust disappears, families become afraid to report crime, and we become a less safe community.

Another facet of an overall fix should focus on our border ports. Our ports of entry should be as modern as our cell phones are. Unfortunately, they are not. They lack significant investment in staff and infrastructure, and what should be a point of opportunity becomes simply a point of obstruction. Every year, \$30 billion of commerce comes across El Paso's ports, but a minimum of at least an hour wait for vehicles and up to 2 – 3 hour wait times for pedestrians during peak periods, creates a disincentive. Consider what that wait feels like, especially for pedestrians, in the sweltering summer southwest sun.

To help be a part of the solution, El Paso County has partnered with our Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) to access FHWA funds for a Southwest Border Trade Demonstration Project (SBTDP) that will use the latest technology to track trucks coming across our ports of entry. It's a solution that, if successful, will help ease the congestion and help create smarter, more secure and efficient ports of entry that keep people and goods moving. We need more solutions like this for our ports of entry so that they are not complete bottlenecks where cars and trucks idle for hours, polluting our air and harming our economy.

I live in a thriving, safe and wonderful border community. I am fiercely loyal to and very proud of El Paso. While some politicians like to use caricatures of the border for purposes of political rhetoric—rhetoric that portrays our communities as dangerous, volatile, and unsafe—the reality for us couldn't be more different. Don't get me wrong. We have challenges, but those challenges can be addressed much more effectively by more responsible burden-sharing by the Federal government, whose mission it is to secure our borders and, by extension, our public safety, our commerce, and our immigrant population. We are indeed on the front-lines and a safe border means a safe nation. But vilifying immigrants, building expensive, ugly walls, and encouraging hysteria and xenophobia only hurts our border communities, our commerce, and the economy of the nation.



Veronica Escobar
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