

## SYMPOSIUM: Interstate Cooperation



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## Regional Cooperation: The Border Legislative Conference

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*The Border Legislative Conference (BLC) is a bi-national program of The Council of State Governments-WEST and its regional partner in the South, the Southern Legislative Conference that serves as a mechanism of cooperation among state legislators of the U.S.-Mexico border region. Financial support of the program is provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).*

**A**t no other time in history have the United States and Mexico enjoyed such an unprecedented level of cooperation on numerous cross-border policy issues. The September 11, 2001 terrorists' attacks in the United States enhanced the need for both countries to work closer, especially to strengthen the security along the U.S.-Mexico border. The time is ripe for lawmakers in both countries to work together on the social and economic challenges that result from rapid population growth, industrialization and global competition.

For almost three years, legislators from the 10 U.S.-Mexico border states have joined together to enhance cross-border dialogue through the Border Legislative Conference (BLC), a binational program of ongoing cooperation among state legislators of the border region. Administered by The Council of State Governments' Western regional office, CSG-WEST, and its regional partner in the south, the Southern Legislative Conference (SLC), the BLC provides a mechanism for legislators to engage in the binational agenda and develop shared solutions to confront the unique, complex challenges along the border.

In its short existence, the BLC has made significant strides in assisting border state legislators to exchange best practices and foster shared policy solutions to benefit the region. To date, eight BLC forums have convened to address key issues affecting the U.S.-Mexico border region, including border security and commerce, water, the environment, health, economic development, substance and alcohol abuse, migration and local government reform.

Moreover, the BLC has developed part-

nerships with other binational organizations such as the Border Governors Conference, Arizona-Mexico Commission, and the U.S.-Mexico Border Health Commission so that border stakeholders increase the exchange of strategies for binational cooperation.

While progress has been made to improve cross-border dialogue at all levels of government on both sides of the border, further strategic actions are needed to enhance the quality of life in the border region and improve its competitiveness in an ever-changing, global economy. Such efforts will not be easy and will require stakeholders to overcome the multi-jurisdictional nature of the U.S.-Mexico border, where projects and initiatives require approval from multiple government bodies.

Additionally, differences in governmental structures, as well as term limits, challenge the continuity of binational cooperation. In Mexico, state legislators, mayors, city councils and federal representatives in the country's Chamber of Deputies are allowed to serve a single three-year term (governors, federal senators and the president serve a single six-year term).

These challenges are compounded by the minimal coordination among entities conducting activities along the border. However, the future and long-term sustainability of the border region will depend on how these entities are able to coordinate and leverage their resources to achieve common goals and benefits.

### Border Realities

The dynamism of the U.S.-Mexico border region is better understood when one realizes the demographics and rapid

changes that have occurred along this unique, diverse region. Stretching nearly 2,000-miles from the San Diego, California-Tijuana, Baja California region along the Pacific Ocean to the Brownsville, Texas-Matamoros, Tamaulipas region on the Gulf of Mexico, the U.S.-Mexico border links two countries that share not only a common border, but also commercial, historic, cultural and educational ties.

Ninety percent of the border population resides in 14 paired, interdependent sister cities. Over the last 20 years, population has grown rapidly in the border region to more than 11.8 million people, with approximately 6.3 million in the United States and 5.5 million in Mexico. This figure is expected to reach 19.4 million by 2020. Additionally, there are 26 U.S. federally recognized Native American tribes in the border region, which range in size from nine to 17,000 members.<sup>1</sup>

This border region has a distinct composition that is as much differentiated by social, economic, and political contrasts as it is bound by cultural fusion and interdependency of its multi-national sister cities. Those who live along the border, whether in Arizona or Texas, Tamaulipas or Chihuahua understand that their livelihoods are inextricably linked to their neighbors on the other side of the border. Indeed, business and society along the border are often more closely tied to one another than their own distant nations' capitals in Washington, D.C. and Mexico City.<sup>2</sup>

Since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect in 1994, trade between Mexico and the United States has almost tripled.<sup>3</sup> Mexico is the

second-largest trading partner of the United States, with \$261 billion in two-way trade in 2000 (about \$700 million/day). U.S. exports to Mexico in 2000 were more than \$110 billion, and U.S. imports from Mexico were more than \$135 billion. Exports to Mexico quadrupled between 1986 and 1994, going from \$12.3 billion to more than \$50 billion, and doubled again by 2000.<sup>4</sup>

The U.S.–Mexico border is recognized as the busiest in the world. There are 43 ports of entry (POEs) on the border. Each year more than 300 million people cross the southern border, approximately 90 million cars and 4.3 million trucks.<sup>5</sup>

### Legislatures Increased Level of Engagement

Over the last decade, the legislatures of the U.S.–Mexico border region have increased their level of engagement in U.S.–Mexico relations and have developed linkages with their regional border counterparts through the creation of border affairs committees. Of the six Mexican states bordering the United States, five have active border affairs committees. These states include Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila and Tamaulipas.

Likewise, in the U.S. border states of California, Arizona and Texas, legislative committees have been established to address cross-border issues and promote greater collaboration with Mexico. While their influence is limited on binational issues within the purview of the federal government, these committees have had success in voicing local concerns to address state issues specific to the border region in the area of the environment, health, regional transportation planning and public safety. Additionally, through their oversight and budget functions, they have been successful in promoting funding for border specific projects and programs.

It is imperative that U.S. and Mexican border state legislatures continue to have a role in the bilateral discussions as the relationship between both countries continues to expand. Because of their unique understanding of the complex issues affecting the border region, border legislators can provide community based approaches that can benefit the constituency of the border region, and can serve as effective critics and advocates of federal proposals in

Washington, D.C. and Mexico City to ensure the adoption of these strategies have the practical correlation to the realities of the border. Additionally, as Mexico continues to undergo political change, state legislatures are becoming breeding grounds for new political leadership and laboratories of policy innovation in the areas of public education, regional planning, and fiscal reform, among others.

### A New Vision

The improvement of the border region's competitiveness is a topic that has captured considerable attention among BLC members and other stakeholders, especially as numerous manufacturing jobs in the border region are being lost to overseas competition. At their recent eighth forum in Santa Fe, New Mexico, BLC members adopted recommendations for the creation of a seamless border that integrates the concepts of "fast, secure and smart" to expedite the crossing of legitimate people and commerce at U.S.–Mexico POEs. A secure, fast, smart border zone would redefine the economic, infrastructure, and manufacturing development policies to account for changing political and population dynamics and to build on the assets of the region.<sup>6</sup> Among the suggested recommendations is greater investment in "one-stop" models at POEs to expedite the crossing of commercial vehicles; create tax incentives for defense related manufacturing to entice knowledge-based and advanced technology firms to locate in the region; investment in border infrastructure, particularly high-priority transportation corridors and the installation of high technology systems at POEs; greater investments in workforce training to meet the demands of high skilled jobs; increase access to capital and credit to assist small and medium companies grow; and encourage better coordination among federal authorities at border crossings.

The enactment of an economic development vision for the southern border will require broad consensus and collaborative partnerships among local, state and federal governments as well as the private and non-governmental sectors on both sides of the border. These sectors must be committed to a common vision and must build on the geographic and binational strengths and potential of each side of the border.

### Conclusion

The U.S.–Mexico border region is confronted with multiple, complex issues that require binational cooperative approaches such as improving air and water quality, joint planning and investment in transportation infrastructure, and addressing health diseases such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis that do not know of border barriers. Moreover, cross-border strategic efforts will be essential to curb substance and alcohol abuse among the youth, and economic competitiveness will rely on an organized, secure and efficient flow of people and goods along the border. Finally, controversial topics such as immigration, drug interdiction, and water distribution will require realistic binational approaches that consider the social and economic implications of the border region and how such policies will affect its ongoing integration.

As the relationship between the United States and Mexico evolves from friends to strategic allies, border stakeholders need to further integrate and coordinate their efforts. The border is no longer a line that divides two sovereign countries, but a region that needs to be understood as an interdependent nucleus of both nations' most strategic trading, social relationship.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Border 2012: U.S.-Mexico Environmental Program, U.S. EPA and Mexico's Secretariat for the Environment and Natural Resources (SEM-ARNAT).

<sup>2</sup>Texas state Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, "Border 2020: Secure, Fast, Smart."

<sup>3</sup>U.S. State Department, "Quick Facts about the U.S.-Mexico Border," [www.state.gov/p/wha/rls/fs/8974.htm](http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rls/fs/8974.htm).

<sup>4</sup>U.S.-Mexico border region at a glance, U.S.-Mexico Border Health Commission.

<sup>5</sup>U.S. State Department.

<sup>6</sup>Sen. Eliot Shapleigh.

### Bio

Edgar Ruiz is the program director of the Border Legislative Conference in CSG's Western regional office. Prior to joining CSG in 2001, he served as management analyst in the Community Development Department of the City of Lake Forest, California, and as legislative staff for then-Assemblywoman (now state Senator) Denise Moreno Ducheny in the California Legislature. He holds a Masters degree in Public Administration and B.A. in Political Science from San Diego State University. 1107 Ninth Street, Suite 650, Sacramento, CA 95814. (916) 553-4423. [er Ruiz@csg.org](mailto:er Ruiz@csg.org).