



Skyline of El Paso, Texas

MANAGING LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN U.S. AND MEXICO WORK CLOSELY TOGETHER BORDER TOWNS

By Karen Davis

The border between the United States and Mexico is many things: a 2,000-mile international boundary; a varied terrain that includes large cities, 23 U.S. counties, and barren deserts; a home to nearly 15 million people; and a political

symbol that assumed a central role in the recent U.S. presidential election.

The people who work in the local governments along the border, however, work with the same challenges that communities everywhere do: keeping residents safe, supporting jobs and busi-

nesses, improving the quality of life, and spending public dollars wisely.

As in other places, successful management depends on working closely with neighboring jurisdictions. Though unlike other places, those neighbors are in another country, and the relationships

can be deeply affected by international trade deals and national politics.

Things are likely to change even more rapidly in the coming years in the cities, towns, and counties that line the border. With both free trade and border security at the heart of President Donald Trump's campaign, some changes along the border seem likely, though the details remain to be seen as this is written.

At the same time, the border communities on both sides are growing faster than the states and countries they're located in, and the managers of those communities will need to grapple with a population that's projected to double by 2045.

In short, it's both a challenging and exciting time to be a local government manager along the border.

Cross-Border Cooperation

Brownsville, Texas, and its Mexican sister city, Matamoros, just across the border, provide an example of how cross-border communities can work together. The region has a combined population of some 1.4 million people, with the majority living on the Mexican side.

While the two already collaborate on issues facing the region, they've recently embarked on a project that would unite the two cities even further, while promoting public health, reducing traffic, and curbing pollution.

Mauricio Ibarra, the planning director for Matamoros who lives in Brownsville, was inspired by the recent opening of Brownsville's linear park, which includes an eight-mile bike path along an abandoned rail line that anchors a museum corridor.

The same abandoned line runs through Matamoros, and Ibarra approached Brownsville officials with the idea of extending the bike path and the cultural district into the Mexican side of the metropolitan area. Residents from both countries would be able to use the path for recreation, and it would also eliminate idling cars waiting to cross at the border.

"This is an example of wanting



Artist rendition of a proposed bike trail that would link the border cities of Matamoros, Mexico, and Brownsville, Texas, which sit across from each other.

to work together because we both have something to gain," says Ruth Osuna, whom Ibarra worked with in her position as Brownsville assistant city manager. (Osuna is now assistant city manager, Oxnard, California.)

"It's complex, because it's two different countries and two different government structures," she continues, "but it's in our best interest to work together to promote sustainability, public health, tourism, and public safety."

There are plenty of hurdles that remain in the bike path plan, but it touches on priorities that unite cross-border communities from San Diego and San Ysidro in the west, all the way to the Gulf of Mexico.

Economic development. From trade to tourism, the economies of border communities are closely tied together. On a grand scale, most of the \$1 billion a day in trade between the two countries passes across the land border, which means the goods make their way through the border cities.

When a national entertainment venue or a retail store considers opening a location in, say, El Paso, Texas, the company also looks at the demographics from the Mexican city of Juarez, knowing residents cross the border regularly to shop and dine.

A significant number of people work in one country and live in another, crossing the border every day to go to work, so cities on both sides benefit from new jobs created along the border, even if those jobs are in the other country.

Public health. Such illnesses and threats to public health as viruses don't respect international boundaries and respond to population migration, so officials along the border must coordinate efforts to halt the spread of disease.

In response to the threat of the Zika virus, local officials worked with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to chart mosquito breeding and combat the spread of the virus.

The border is also a microcosm of the future of chronic disease, with diabetes and other complications of obesity more prevalent there than in many other regions of the United States. Officials are responding by promoting active transportation and built environments that encourage walking.

"If you can't tackle it here," says Claudia Lujan, assistant human resources director for El Paso, Texas, "you're going to lose control of it nationally."

The environment. Like disease, water contamination and pollution don't respect international boundaries. Cars



While much of the United States-Mexico border is desolate, there are seven metropolitan regions that include cities from each country and whose economic and demographic fates are intertwined. These include San Diego/San Ysidro and Tijuana; Yuma and San Luis; Nogales and Nogales; El Paso and Juarez; Del Rio and Acuna; Laredo and Nueva Laredo; and Brownsville and Matamoros.

idling at the border contribute to poor air quality, so local government officials do all they can to reduce emissions by moving traffic through their cities quickly after the crossing and supporting federal efforts to ease border waits.

The chief resilience officers of El Paso and Juarez, who represent the largest metro area along the border with a combined population of 2.7 million people, work closely together. Their efforts are bolstered by collaborative agreements to protect their limited water supply, to cope with occasional flooding, and to respond to a changing climate.

Public safety. While border communities have a reputation for being dangerous, it's largely not true. The Texas cities of Brownsville, El Paso, and Laredo have crime rates far below Houston and Dallas, though the border communities have benefitted from greater attention to border safety and an influx of law enforcement.

Still, public-safety officials from both the U.S. and Mexico work closely

together to plan emergency responses and control the flow of drugs, guns, and undocumented workers. When Pope Francis visited Juarez early in 2016, for example, it wasn't just Mexican officials who undertook security planning. Their counterparts in El Paso also had to prepare for possible disruptions, with extensive cooperation on both sides of the border.

Unique Challenges

There are other challenges that are unique to communities along the border. The cities on the American side, spreading across the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, tend to be poorer than the average U.S. city.

More than a third of Brownsville residents, and nearly three in 10 people in El Paso, for instance, live below the poverty line, compared to 13.5 percent of Americans overall.¹

At the same time, the border cities on the Mexican side tend to have higher incomes and wealth than Mexico at large, though the gap between the two

sides is narrowing. Universities like New Mexico State University are lowering tuition for Mexican students to encourage the pursuit of higher education.

There are also cultural quirks to working in many border communities. Managers from other U.S. regions who move to a border city or county are sometimes surprised to find the entire place, including local government offices, shut down on May 10, which is celebrated as Mother's Day in Mexico.

New-employee orientations and other meetings are often conducted bilingually, and Osuna remembers speaking to a group of public works employees. "When I was done," she says, "They turned around and said, 'Okay, now say it in Spanish.'"

While the council-manager form of government isn't the norm in Mexico, ICMA has worked in Mexico since the 1990s to provide professional development, improve service delivery, support municipal associations, and encourage resident participation.

In addition, the International Hispanic Network provides a forum for networking and knowledge sharing to local government employees working in border communities.

Though the immediate political future of the border is unclear, those who work in the cities and counties along it have a full agenda. Whatever happens, there will still be plenty of opportunities to foster cooperation, minimize threats, and improve the outlook for people who live and work in communities on both sides of the border. **PM**

ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES:

1 U.S.: <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/visualizations/p60/256/figure4.pdf>. Brownsville (36 percent): <http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/texas/article/Brownsville-named-the-poorest-city-in-America-4939821.php>. El Paso (29 percent): <http://www.city-data.com/poverty/poverty-El-Paso-Texas.html>.



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