

## Barry R. McCaffrey: Geography gives El Paso important voice on border, trade issues

Barry R. McCaffrey / Guest columnist

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During the past 15 years, I've visited El Paso frequently to gain a first-hand understanding of our nation's border infrastructure and security challenges.

With Mexico serving as the United States' third-largest trade partner, one of the greatest issues facing Texas's border and transportation systems is the ongoing challenge to enhance border security while providing safe and efficient movement of people and goods across the border.

While the violence in Mexican border communities and states has surged in recent years as the Mexican government mounts a full-court press against powerful drug cartels, El Paso and other U.S. towns along the border have been spared from significant spillover violence.

In fact, El Paso maintains its ranking as one of the safest large cities in the United States. Baltimore, a similar-sized city, has 10 times as many murders each year.

There is another reason for measured optimism. Consensus is increasing in Mexico that corruption and weak rule of law undermine the nation's competitiveness and are impediments to its economic development.

Critical U.S. security and economic interests also are at stake in Mexico. Two-way trade between our two nations has quadrupled since the passage of NAFTA to some \$1 billion per day.

With approximately 27 percent of the U.S. economy dependent on trade, stability in Mexico is good for our economy.

While the \$1.3 billion in counterdrug and anticrime assistance to Mexico through the Mérida Initiative is a step in the right direction, the U.S. government must do more to support our partners in Mexico.

This is a drop in the bucket when compared with the

\$8 billion spent each month in Afghanistan.

El Paso and other gateway cities in Texas are critical to U.S.-Mexico trade. Texas is the largest trade route between Mexico and the United States with two-thirds of commerce entering at El Paso continuing on to other states.

Unfortunately, the federal government's investment in border trade infrastructure is not keeping pace with trade demands.

The cost of upgrading just one major port of entry is more than twice what the federal government spends on border infrastructure each year.

States and municipal planning organizations are facing the reality that they must find their own solutions to address border congestion problems. We're already seeing examples of local leadership by the Texas Department of Transportation with the El Paso Regional Port of Entry Operations plan currently under way to identify cross-border mobility improvements.

State, federal and private stakeholders also are weighing in on new rail crossings.

While the jury is still out on the solution, one thing is certain: additional rail capacity is desperately needed to alleviate cross-border trade congestion.

Freight rail must increase by at least ten-fold over the next decade in order to effectively manage anticipated demand. Today, a single rail freight line, BNSF, manages more than half of the freight volume.

In order to improve secure trade along the border, we must consider other alternatives such as increasing private-public-partnerships and attracting investment through expanded user fees and congestion pricing during peak hours.

El Paso's strategic geographic significance and its link to Mexico's economic and political success will continue to allow the city to have a voice in border and trade policy and planning on the state and national stage.

*Retired Army Gen. Barry R. McCaffrey was in El Paso on Tuesday on behalf of the HNTB Companies, where he serves on the board of directors, as the keynote speaker at the 2010 Border to Border Transportation Conference hosted by the Hidalgo County and El Paso Metropolitan Planning Organizations.*