

McCaffrey: Transportation infrastructure is critical for Texas

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One of the greatest issues facing Texas' border and transportation systems is the ongoing challenge to enhance border security while providing safe and efficient movement of people and goods through the border.

The volume of activity along the U.S.-Mexico border is enormous and expanding each year. Trade with Mexico has more than quadrupled in the past 15 years from \$81 million in 1993 to nearly \$350 billion in 2007. Projected to reach at least one and a half times that number by 2020, Mexico is our fastest growing trade partner.

Nearly 80 percent of the trade between the United States and Mexico is transported via roads or rail. In Texas alone, that equates to 3.1 million inbound and 2.7 million outbound trucks each year.

Border transportation and inspection infrastructure have not been able to keep pace with this growing trade volume. Texas is home to six of the 10 busiest commercial border crossings, including the top two: Laredo and El Paso. The high volume of trade focused on these few border crossings and the U.S. reliance on Texas' already overwhelmed transportation infrastructure to move goods across the state and the country are causing a bottleneck for economic growth. Delays at the border are getting longer and more frequent, averaging 20 minutes in El Paso and 40 minutes to one hour in Laredo. Major choke points along the border pose a significant threat to security and trade.

But with every challenge comes great opportunity. Texas is taking center stage as a hub of North American trade. It shares more than two-thirds of the U.S. border with Mexico and for the sixth consecutive year, the Lone Star State has ranked first in the nation in export revenues. Proposed "mega ports" on Mexico's Pacific coast are slated to supplement U.S. port capacity in Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles to allow expanded trade volume between Asia and the United States.

I commend Gov. Rick Perry, Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, lawmakers of both political parties and Texas Department of Transportation Executive Director Amadeo Saenz for the progress of major transportation corridors, especially the expansion of Texas 130 and Interstate 69 that will help reduce congestion and increase freight throughput.

Texas is showing that America can enhance border security while enhancing border trade and transportation. Still, additional investments at ports of entry and strategic corridors are required to expand Texas' role as the southern U.S. trade corridor. This investment must focus on expanding the volume of trade across multiple modes of transportation, specifically rail.

Local and federal governments must work together to identify incentives that will provide private capital opportunities to invest in transportation through Texas. There is no single solution; it is a complex and integrated system that requires investment and focus from government officials, private industry and citizens.

McCaffrey, a retired Army officer, is in Austin today as the keynote speaker at TxDOT's 2010 Summit Conference. He serves as a security analyst for NBC News and is chairman of HNTB Federal Services Corp. and an adjunct professor at the U.S. Military Academy.