

COUNTY COMMITTED TO PROGRESS AND THE COMMUNITY: PUSHING PROJECTS TO COMPLETION

Planning and developing major projects is not easy. There are many factors to consider. Will the project improve safety, will it promote a better quality of life, does it address development or redevelopment, how are you dealing with congestion, mobility and connectivity? These are all questions that need to be answered when analyzing and prioritizing projects. Cameron County has been at the forefront when it comes to transportation and infrastructure projects in our cities and in our region. Whether it's working with our federal and state partners at the Federal Highway Administration and the Texas Department of Transportation or local partners like the Cities of Brownsville, Harlingen, San Benito, South Padre Island and other municipalities or entities like the Port of Brownsville, the County has sponsored and lead major multi-million dollar projects throughout the area for many years. Our track record speaks for itself.

There is a tremendous amount of work and attention to detail that takes place when working on major projects. One needs to understand the process and the level of commitment. These are not projects that get done in one or two years but rather take more than five and many times up to ten years or longer to complete. There is a tremendous amount of public involvement that takes place and there are federal and state laws that need to be followed in order to get project approval. The first and most important step is the environmental study. Cameron County understands and knows this process all too well. As an example, on one project alone, the county had to undertake three separate environmental studies because three separate federal agencies were participating with federal funds. In the last five to ten years the county has completed or has underway approximately ten environmental studies on projects that affect the entire Cameron County community. Achieving this milestone under such rigorous rules and regulations is a testament to our commitment to progress.

Cameron County has been successful at not only securing federal and state dollars but also at project delivery. But it takes a concerted effort every single time monies become available. It is a battle trying to go up against the larger counties and cities from throughout the state of Texas. At the end of the day, the reality is that we are fighting just to get the crumbs that are left over after the larger cities and regions take the dollars they want. These monies are called **DISCRETIONARY** dollars and they can be allocated to any part of the state or region that transportation leaders decide on and almost always it is Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston, Austin, San Antonio, and even El Paso. With ONE regional MPO in the Rio Grande Valley the region has an opportunity to go after these dollars and to have a seat at the table when federal and state dollars become available. We do not have that luxury today and it is a Big Problem. Imagine having representation at the meetings that take place when the Big Four - Austin, San Antonio, Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston - are discussing how to dole out funding for important statewide transportation improvements. With a merger we have that chance. Without the merger we continue status quo and receiving crumbs and not playing a larger role in the bigger picture planning and infrastructure needs of the state and region.

We hear so many leaders talk about regionalism, collaboration, and cooperation, but we don't really see that playing out when it comes to the Valley MPO merger. Everyone was quick to jump on the UTRGV merger bandwagon. What is the difference between that merger and this one? The Valley is ONE. The Valley is growing. Haven't we recognized that by now? The Valley is in need of funding for education, infrastructure, and many other important issues that we are faced with now as a metropolitan region of the state. Like the UTRGV merger, with an MPO merger we send another strong message that the Valley means business and that we want our share of the dollars that come out of D.C. or Austin. And so we support this merger because it will unify us once and for all and give us an opportunity to grow the funding pie providing every community in the Rio Grande Valley more opportunities at the state level. We support the merger because it will increase our chances for DISCRETIONARY dollars when pursuing regional type projects. We support the merger because a majority of funding today goes to the Big Four and if the three valley MPO's were to merge we would be the fifth largest MPO in the state exceeding a population of 1,000,000 right behind Austin and a guaranteed seat at the table. And we support the merger because we know by working with federal and state transportation agencies that a regional approach and coordination carries much more weight when NEW dollars such as American Recovery Reinvestment Act, Proposition 12, Proposition 1, Proposition 7, and future dollars become available.

With regards to project delivery, Cameron County is a leader when it comes to multi-faceted, multi-funding and multi-dimensional projects. County leaders have a clear vision for the future and for the needs of all the community as a whole. That is why we have supported and developed numerous quality of life projects. In every city in the county we have undertaken infrastructure projects, big and small but just as important no matter the cost, because we know that we will help to improve the daily lives of all our citizens. In the last few months statements have been made regarding the county's lack of participation on the West Rail Trail Corridor Town Hall meetings. The county has opted not to engage during these meetings because there is still no decision made yet on the project sponsorship of the West Parkway Boulevard project.

Understanding the environmental process, the county knows well that an extensive amount of public involvement will take place once the **purpose and need** of the project is established. Cameron County strongly believes that we are best positioned to take the lead and work in tandem with the City of Brownsville to move this project forward. And so despite the numerous factually incorrect comments made by some in the public regarding this corridor, Cameron County understands what it takes to develop and undertake this project and has made that offer to city officials recently.

Our hesitance regarding the West Rail Trail Corridor has been because we know what we face moving forward. Coming on the heels of a monumental achievement in the West Rail Bridge project, the County knows what it takes to get the project done and done right. For the West Rail Bridge project hundreds of coordination meetings took place over the course of almost fifteen years. There is a tremendous amount of sweat equity and passion to see this West Park Boulevard project to its end as well. We have an enormous opportunity with an eight mile, 100 foot right of way corridor that can be redeveloped. But there are potential pitfalls and it will be difficult and challenging. The County is ready to take on another historic project like the West Park Boulevard and working together with the city we know we will be able to develop something that the entire community of Brownsville and Cameron County will be proud of.

Cameron County has always taken a proactive approach to assisting the City of Brownsville with projects. One project we are certainly proud of is the Morrison Road West and East project. We were able to successfully secure the federally earmarked funds for the Morrison Road project - an achievement that according to Federal Highway Administration officials had never been accomplished before in Texas. On this particular project the County stepped in to assist the city when it was determined by the federal government that proper property acquisition guidelines were not adhered to by the city. The city was on the verge of losing \$4 million dollars but partnering with the city manager's office the county recreated the process by going back a number of years and locating property owners to make them whole. Thus, we were able to acquire the nearly lost funds and the city did not have to tap into their own coffers to finance the project saving the taxpayers millions of dollars.

In addition, the County has invested heavily on Morrison Road by way of an agreement in place for this designated Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone (TIRZ). The county recognized early on that with their tax increment funds allocated to the zone private funds could then be leveraged to close the funding gap to then finance the infrastructure improvements and spur economic development at a much faster pace. Cameron County has contributed millions of dollars throughout the term of this TIRZ. And so despite what some have said, the county's commitment to Morrison Road and to north Brownsville and to the opening of the intersection at the railroad tracks on the county right of way has never wavered.

Another example of a project the County and the CCRMA are undertaking within the city limits of Brownsville is the East Loop project. Both entities with assistance and cooperation from TxDOT are diligently working on the East Loop project in Southeast part of Brownsville. Working to get environmental clearance is of the utmost priority to Cameron County. County officials have already secured \$45 million from the state of Texas for this project. For those of you unaware traveling on International Boulevard in the morning and afternoon rush hour traffic can be painstakingly arduous given the eighteen wheelers moving along this route to the Port of Brownsville. This is the current overweight corridor for commercial traffic and the county working with our state legislators and the Port of Brownsville already has designated the new East Loop route once it is built and open to traffic. The start and stop traffic we see with the big eighteen wheelers will move away once the East Loop is built. This overweight corridor will move many of the trucks carrying steel coils and other heavy cargo away from the populated areas of Brownsville. It is a safety, environmental, and mobility project that will benefit the traveling public as well as schools, clinic and businesses along the route. The accident rate on this corridor is also one of the highest in the state at ten times the state average. Once most commercial traffic is rerouted to the new East Loop overweight corridor one of the most heavily traversed streets in Brownsville will see much less stress as well as wear and tear giving the motorists the ability to move much easier. This is a project that will have long term benefits for the city and the county is committed to building this project - one that has been on the books for many years. A lot of time and money has been spent to get the project to construction and here towards the end of the year one phase of the project is on schedule for an environmental decision. We hope that the City can provide some financial assistance to this project in the near future.

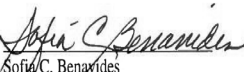
Our commitment is to you. We want all of Cameron County to succeed and we want all of Brownsville to succeed. Recently, the County invested in the purchase of a building in downtown Brownsville. The plan is to relocate the tax office to this location a department that has very heavy volumes of foot and motor traffic on a daily basis. This we believe will drive people into the heart of downtown Brownsville everyday spurring development and hopefully reenergizing the quiet downtown community. We should not lose sight of the downtown potential for investment and revitalization. We can encourage redevelopment in the downtown area but the only way this will happen is if there is access to get to and from in and out as quickly as possible. We understand this paradigm and know that we need to improve the East, West, North and South corridors if we want to accomplish long term success for all of Brownsville. In addition, the county is considering options for a future judicial courthouse complex and the potential site(s) that would accommodate future growth and access for all of Cameron County.

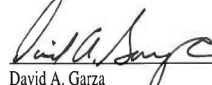
Working together is a two way street and accomplishing our objectives for the greater good has always been our ultimate goal. It is only the right thing to do for the entire county. We owe it to our taxpayers, to our community and to our children. Doing for the benefit of one group or cause will never be our way of doing things but instead watching out for those who work hard every day, live paycheck to paycheck and need to have the proper infrastructure and amenities to make their daily commute easier and more efficient as they go about their daily routine. This is our number one priority.


As always, we stand ready to work and to find the resources necessary to fund and build all of our projects. We need to do it together and we need to be unified. This Court despite what is said will continue to work on a regional approach and on behalf of every community in Cameron County and the Rio Grande Valley now and into the future.


Thank You.


Pete Sepulveda, Jr.
County Judge


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