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Toward a Virtual Border XXI: Meeting the Needs of U.S.-Mexican Border Communities in the Twenty- First Century

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INTRODUCTION

U.S.-Mexican relations have never been easy. In 1910, President Porfirio Diaz lamented, Poor Mexico! So far from God and so close to the United States. During the debate on NAFTA, some on both sides of the border would have modified this expression to read, Poor Mexico Poor United States! So far from God and so close to each other.

No two countries enjoy a closer relationship in trade and history. Even before NAFTA, Mexico's total trade with the United States in 1990 exceeded \$58 billion, making it the United States' third largest trading partner, behind Canada and Japan. By 1995, trade with Mexico had nearly doubled to \$108 billion. In 1998, trade was closer to \$170 billion.

Although NAFTA has increased economic activity on the border, it has also resulted in increased population growth (on both sides of the border), along with increased demands on natural resources, especially water. Dealing with economic growth and environmental constraints is the challenge of the future. Border Institute I begins a new effort by all stakeholders to help shape the future development of this region.

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Table 1: Economic and Social Indices for the United States as a Whole

Index	U.S. Average	Southwest States	Border
Population growth: 1990-1996	6.6%	10%	15%
Per capita income	\$14,420	\$13,505	\$10,648
Unemployment rate	4.8%	5.6%	7.4%
Median household income	\$30,056	\$28,610	\$20,747
Persons in poverty	13.1%	16.7%	25.5%
Persons 25 years and over with high school education	75.2%	75.5%	61.5%
Persons 25 years and over with college education	20.3%	21.1%	12.3%

ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL INEQUITY ON THE U.S.-
MEXICAN BORDER

By most measures, U.S. border communities (defined as communities located within 60 miles of the U.S.-Mexican border) are disadvantaged in relation to U.S. national averages. The following table compares a number of economic and social indices for the United States as a whole, for the southwestern states, and for U.S. border communities.¹

It is clear from the above data that the economic and educational foundation of the border is weak, and that creative and bold thinking at the grassroots level is going to be necessary to change the pattern in the future. Business as usual in the border region means continued reliance on manufacturing jobs, low wages, low educational standards, increased natural resource use, and a growing, but not prosperous, economy. Eventually, environmental constraints and conflicts between the United States and Mexico will create a binational crisis.

ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The southwestern border region of the United States is on the front line of NAFTA. The ability of communities to shape what this region will look like in the future requires close collaboration among local, state, and federal authorities and with Mexico. Nowhere else in the United States is the future well-being of U.S. citizens so closely related to the economic and social development of Mexico.

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Border communities are unique and deserve greater national recognition. To their credit, border communities are beginning to take charge of their future, and, in quiet ways, are beginning to lead the United States on planning for a sustainable America.

The theme of sustainable development is not alien or threatening to many border communities. Instead, there is a growing awareness among border communities of the need to shape the future in ways that address the social inequities, ensure sustained economic growth, and protect the cultural heritage and natural resources for future generations. Sister cities are families, and the fate of a city on one side of the border is intimately tied to the fate of its neighbor on the other side.

The U.S.-Mexican border program, Border XXI, makes a special effort to focus on sustainable development. The mission statement for Border XXI is To achieve a clean environment, protect public health and natural resources, and encourage sustainable development along the U.S.-Mexico border.

This mission statement is an important road map to the future. Both federal governments are concerned about development on the border and are seeking ways to ensure that this development does not create binational conflicts related to water use, transboundary pollution, hazardous siting, or the transport of goods and waste across the border. The federal perspective is based on application of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Pressure-State-Response Model to the border region. The pressures are increased economic development, largely driven by NAFTA; increased population, including some of the fastest growing communities in the United States; stresses on the natural resources, especially water; and the need for binational solutions to the problems associated with rapid growth. The state of the border is reflected in the first binational report on environmental indicators.² The joint response to these conditions, as reflected in the annual binational work plan, which is organized in nine working groups, is to encourage community and state focus on long-term development issues.

While Border XXI identifies sustainability as a long-term goal, it also makes clear that achieving this goal is a shared responsibility among states, local communities, the private sector, and the public. It is up to the states on both sides of the border to take the lead in shaping their own future, while the federal government's role is to help facilitate actions and, specifically, to address transboundary problems that by law and national policy require federal participation.

What some states are doing is a model for the future. For example, the state of Texas has prepared a thoughtful review of the challenges

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and opportunities on the border. The report of the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts suggests³ Real earning per capita will more than double by 2020. The same forecast suggests that, barring unforeseen changes, the regions standing relative to the rest of the state will still deteriorate during this period.

The Texas study concludes that the border region must have a new economic strategy with emphasis on new industries that enhance opportunities for skilled labor and higher wages, and that protect shared natural resources. The key to an economically viable region is not simply growth but smart growth that is both economically and environmentally sustainable.

BECC AND ENVIRONMENTAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The economic vitality of the border region requires adequate infrastructure support. The BECC and NADBank are key institutions in ensuring that adequate environmental infrastructure is properly designed, financially viable, and contributes to supporting sustainable development in the region. The BECC has incorporated sustainable development criteria for reviewing border infrastructure projects and has initiated a program with EPA funding to assist smaller communities in developing projects.

However, the BECC and NADBank alone are not enough to ensure an economically viable and sustainable border region. As recognized by the Good Neighbor Environmental Board (GNEB), a congressionally mandated advisory committee to Border XXI:⁴

For the past several years, both sides of the border have experienced significant developmental pressures due to industrialization, migration, and population growth. Environmental, health, housing, transportation, and other infrastructure has not kept pace with this development. The interconnection of environment, health, housing, and transportation infrastructure-related problems makes it imperative that infrastructure issues be addressed more comprehensively.

EMPOWERMENT ZONES

The federal government has recognized that this region needs economic help. In 1993, Congress authorized the creation of empowerment zones and enterprise communities across the nation as tools to stimulate economic development. On December 21, 1994, the Rio

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Grande Valley became one of three rural empowerment zones. The Rio Grande Valley Corporation has leveraged more than \$95 million for infrastructure projects, jobs and job training, educational services, and the development of health services and facilities.

On April 16, 1997, Vice President Al Gore, at a White House Empowerment Conference, challenged the southwest border region to develop a united and regional approach to economic and community development. What resulted from this challenge is a proposal for the Southwest Border Regional Partnership: a unique consortium of empowerment and enterprise zones designed to achieve, safe and economically dynamic communities that celebrate the strength of our families, diversity of our culture, and the preservation of our previous resources for generations to come [emphasis added].

The preservation of natural resources for future generations is a common goal of both economic development and environmental protection. Given a common goal, all should work together to ensure that this goal is achieved. What I see evolving is a convergence of federal, state, and local community action whereby economic development, the alleviation of poverty, social improvement, and environmental protection become linked as one.

These relationships can be further cemented through Border Institute I and meetings such as the White House Conference on Sustainable Development (May 1999) and the Border XXI Conference titled Road to Detroit. In addition, SEMARNAP is hosting a six-Mexican-state meeting in Reynosa in January 2000 to discuss criticism of sustainable development.

All these events are opportunities for border communities to showcase what they are doing and to learn from each other. We have a powerful collective message for the Presidential Conference on Sustainable Development in Detroit in May 1999. Our collective efforts are aimed at achieving sustainable economic growth on the border, and to:

- 1 Improve environmental conditions
- 1 Strengthen local capacity
- 1 Raise the standard of living and improve education
- 1 Recognize the diversity of people and protect cultural heritage
- 1 Eliminate transboundary conflicts

We propose to achieve the above by promoting community-led activities to shape future growth, by developing stronger partnerships between federal agencies and between federal and states authorities, and by creating new partnerships with the private sector.

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PRIVATE SECTOR

The private sector is an important element of economic growth on the border and a necessary partner in achieving sustainable development. The GNEB stated in its 1998 Annual Report, We emphasize that greater industry involvement is needed in addressing issues related to border economic development, conducting research, applying technologies, and augmenting government resources for infrastructure and training.

Present Border XXI efforts with the private sector are focused on promoting clean production and pollution prevention in the maquiladora sector. Extensive bilateral training and technical assistance programs have been organized at the federal and state level. Efforts by the state of Texas, in cooperation with PROFEPA in Mexico, have resulted in significant pollution reduction and cost saving to the participating maquiladora facilities on the Texas border. The participating facilities have reported annual reductions of four to five million gallons of wastewater, over 70,000 tons of hazardous waste, and over 47,700 tons of nonhazardous waste, as well as a reduction in electricity use of over eight million kilowatt hours.

Beyond the maquiladora sector, the private sector in total must be involved in long-range planning for the border. The EPA and the U.S.-Mexico Chamber of Commerce are working on developing a set of sustainable development principles to help guide future development in the border area and throughout the United States and Mexico.

Behind the state of principles, the private sector must be an active partner in new technology, development, new industry planning, and industrial management. In this case, SCERP and related academic institutions have a key role to play. I look to this meeting as one opportunity to help define a research and technical agenda that contributes to achieving sustainable development.

BORDER 2000

While my focus remains on environmental protection and needed infrastructure to support a healthy and safe environment, I see our work as intimately related to economic and social development on the border. The EPA's GNEB has given us a broad challenge: Border XXI should continue to expand coverage and integrate additional issue areas, become over time, the umbrella process for defining an overall sustainable development strategy for the region, linking binational efforts and coordinating public and private programs and resources.

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This is a broad goal and a major challenge, achievable only if supported at the grassroots level. As a first step toward this objective, I propose the creation of a Virtual Border XXI in which our work on the environment, economic development, and social improvements are all linked. This Virtual Border XXI is a common meeting ground of ideas and information, which will feed a growing partnership of development and environmental protection at all levels of government. A common website for all our activities would be a useful first step.

I believe we all share the same long-term goal for the U.S.-Mexican border. There is strength in our different institutional perspectives. It is apparent to me that progress on the border will require two things: close federal, state, and local cooperation, and effective U.S.-Mexican bilateral programs. Border XXI has gone a long way to help Mexico address these programs through greater transparency, public participation, and strategic planning. Mexico should be viewed as an active partner in our common quest for sustainable development on the border.

Our goal for the future should be Mexico and the United States so close to each other and so close to God.

NOTES

1. From Roland S. Arriola, University of Texas, Pan American, Edinburg, Texas.
2. U.S.-Mexico Border Environmental Indicators 1997: Report from Border XXI. EPA Publication 909-R-98-007. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1997).
3. John Sharp. *Bordering the Future: Challenges and Opportunities in the Texas Border Region*, (Austin: Comptroller of Public Accounts 1998).
4. Good Neighbor Environmental Board Annual Report, July 1998.
5. Good Neighbor Environmental Board Annual Report, July 1998.