



WRITTEN STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD OF

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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS
(WASHINGTON, DC)**

**BEFORE THE
HOUSE TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE
ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS
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HOUSE TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE
HEARING ON ARC REAUTHORIZATION AND PROPOSED REGIONAL COMMISSIONS * JULY 12, 2006
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, for the opportunity to testify today about the concept of federal-state regional commissions, and more specifically, the pending legislative proposal (HR 5742) for the Southwest Regional Border Authority. I also want to extend my appreciation to Representatives Henry Bonilla and Silvestre Reyes for their dedication and hard work along the border.

My name is Jake Brisbin. I am the Executive Director of the Rio Grande Council of Governments, headquartered in El Paso, Texas. I am also a member of the Board of Directors for the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) and Chairman of the NADO Task Force on Homeland Security.

My professional background includes extensive service as both a public and private sector official with entities along the US-Mexico border. I am a past commissioner, mayor and county judge of border entities. In fact, the county where I served as judge shares over one hundred miles of border with Mexico. In addition to my devotion to public service, I previously owned and operated a successful telecommunications firm on the border for sixteen years.

In my current capacity, I am responsible for leading the efforts of the Rio Grande Council of Governments. Our organization covers more than 22,000 square miles and parts of two states (Texas and New Mexico). The primary focus of our organization is to provide a regional forum for local governments to address issues and develop solutions that contribute to intergovernmental cooperation, improve the delivery and coordination of services and enhance the quality of life and economic prospects of our citizens and communities.

In my testimony, Mr. Chairman, I will briefly outline the broad concept of federal-state regional commissions. I will discuss the unique economic and social challenges facing communities along the US-Mexico border. Finally, I will outline the rationale for creating a federal-state regional commission to assist distressed communities along the border in Arizona, California, New Mexico and Texas.

First, Mr. Chairman, it is important to frame the broad concept and purpose of federal-state regional commissions, with the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) serving as the model and gold standard. In this era of constrained public sector resources, intensive program accountability and performance standards and complicated and interconnected public policy issues, we should be crafting and supporting governmental programs and institutions that coordinate and leverage resources, establish strategic priorities and plans, and bring together public, private and non-profit sector leaders.

The model of federal-state regional commissions, as proven over the past four decades by ARC, is effective, efficient and timeless. Simply put, federal-state regional commissions offer an intergovernmental partnership framework to assist regions of the country that are suffering from chronic and pervasive levels of poverty and distress. They are a clear recognition that the most severely distressed regions of the nation need additional resources and attention to overcome persistent challenges, and that economic recovery and competitiveness takes time, comprehensive planning and commitment at the federal, state and local levels.

Regional commissions, such as the proposed Southwest Regional Border Authority, are also unique because they have a flexible and comprehensive set of program tools to help the most distressed regions develop the building blocks for economic development, such as basic infrastructure, job skills training, local leadership and civic capacity, entrepreneurship, small business capital and accessible health care services. These are essential components that allow a region and individual communities to compete in today's competitive marketplace. While the private sector is the primary source of job creation and economic growth, we also know that business and industry expects and often demands that public entities provide and maintain these essential services and infrastructure.

Even more importantly, regional commissions are distinctive from other federal programs because they forge a true intergovernmental partnership of federal, state and local officials. Federal-state regional commissions operate on the basic principle that the coordination, leveraging and involvement of federal, state and local leaders will make a greater difference for a targeted region than by working separately and individually. The challenges facing

regions such as the US-Mexico border are so complex and multifaceted that it demands a targeted, sustained and comprehensive approach.

My experience has led me to the conclusion that regionalism employed in an area of commonality is wise and effective, both in terms of cost and goal attainment. All too often, past efforts along the border have hit roadblocks and suffered poor results due to a lack of coordination and communications between communities, organizations and governmental officials. As demonstrated in the Appalachian region, there is tremendous power in bringing together a lead federal official with the governors and state governments of a region to design, pursue and invest in a common strategic vision.

The use of multi-county local development districts to provide the professional technical assistance, local leadership and long-term organizational support for projects, initiatives and programs is also essential and noteworthy. Unlike most of our nation's metropolitan and wealthier communities, local governments and unincorporated areas along the border typically lack the luxury of professional community and economic development staff. The system of local development districts (known as councils of government in Texas) offers an efficient, proven and cost-effective model that gives distressed and rural communities access to professional staff, creates a forum for regional dialogue and planning, and provides the expertise to help local communities and regions craft and pursue a strategic plan.

My second major point, Mr. Chairman, is that communities along the US-Mexico border are faced with a unique and complicated set of economic and social challenges that require a coordinated, sustained and high-level of attention by federal, state and local policy officials. I believe that the organizational and leadership structure afforded by a federal-state regional commission such as the proposed Southwest Regional Border Authority would be a positive step for the region.

The economic status of the border region is grim and almost unparalleled. The poverty rate along the Southwest border is 20 percent, nearly double the national average. Unemployment rates in Southwest border counties often reach as high as five times the

national unemployment rate and per capita income in the region is greatly below the national average. Compounding the issue is the fact that much of the personal income in the region is distributed through federal and state welfare programs, retirement plans and unemployment payments.

As outlined in a recent report by the US-Mexico Border Counties Coalition, our communities are also struggling with the financial and social costs associated with the reality that almost 29 percent of the region's population is under the age of 18 and more than half a million (or 27.2 percent) of our region's children and youth live in poverty. If the border region were considered a state, according to the Coalition, it would rank second-to-last in high school graduation rates, last in the presence of health care professionals and last in rankings of per capita income levels.

It is often too difficult for local communities and governments in my region and along the border to keep pace with the consequences of federal trade, immigration, health care and homeland security policies while simultaneously making the investments needed for basic and essential public services such as water and wastewater, education, transportation, public health and telecommunications services. Given the growing population and diversity along the border, we are in dire need of a new institutional model that can coordinate strategic public investments, establish a forward-thinking vision for the region and serve as an advocate for a region facing unprecedented challenges with unmet infrastructure, health care, education and transportation needs.

In examining just the basic water and wastewater needs of the border communities, one can quickly see the hurdles that we must overcome to provide a better environment for our citizens and economic development. According to the Texas Water Development Board's most recent study, there are 2,333 cities and unincorporated communities along the border in my home state that have inadequate water and wastewater facilities. The estimated need to either provide first-time services or bring existing systems up to current regulatory standards is nearly \$800 million. Without leveraging funds from multiple sources, coordinating public and private sector investments and developing a strategic action plan as

a region, it will be nearly impossible for each individual community to tackle these needs, let alone become attractive locations for existing and potential businesses.

Not all the news from the southwestern border is grim. Our region has had pockets of economic success, such as El Puente Community Development Corporations (CDC). The organization is a spin off of Mujer Obrera (Working Women), which was formed in the 1980s to assist in the retraining and re-employment of displaced garment workers. It has been able to offer social, educational and economic opportunities, such as enterprise development, bilingual on-the-job training and access to technology. The CDC currently operates a successful catering and restaurant business, which is staffed by NAFTA-displaced workers, and a market featuring fine arts from Mexico. It is currently in the process of renovating a 40,000 square foot warehouse and manufacturing building to be used as a multipurpose social enterprise facility.

Other regional initiatives are capitalizing on the unique culture and resources of the border by utilizing a high-technology approach to economic competitiveness. The United States-Mexico Foundation for Science (FUMEC) employed seed capital from the Economic Development Administration (EDA) to develop the Bi-National Sustainability Laboratory (BNSL). BNSL's core mission is fostering long-term technology-based economic development along the border. The lab works to build public-private partnerships that will diversify economies on both sides of the border.

My third and final point, Mr. Chairman, is that I envision the Southwest Regional Border Authority to be the primary tool to address the current needs of our border communities. The joint federal and state makeup, with its bottom-up approach, with the guidelines adjusted to fit border realities and with COGs already in place and ready to help administer vital programs, is the right approach. This, of course, is nothing new. The other regional commissions currently in place are proof that there is merit in the idea. The new federal funds would be coherently managed from a regional approach, and the return on those funds to the federal coffers would be significant. All those involved in the business of community and economic development have seen this model work.

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In short, we ask that you give us, the residents and local governments of the nation's southwestern border region, decision making power in regard to the use of federal funds for water, sewer, entrepreneurial development, telecommunications, technologies and transportation infrastructure to generate a healthier economy.

The success of councils of government and regional development organizations in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California is a documented fact. The regionalism concept is working now. The one glaring shortcoming is the difficulty in matching needs with programs. The Southwest Regional Border Authority would be the tool to make it all come together, the final buy-in by federal and state government officials to the realization that regions are unique, and the best answers to local problems are found at the local and regional level.

The reality of living on the border is filled with events unfamiliar to most Americans. We need a new framework to get locally determined needs addressed through a regional approach, coordinated at every level and reviewed for economic impact, benefit and priority. Unfortunately, this cannot be done from Washington, DC alone. It is a great challenge to make the region a contributor to the nation's wealth, not a statistical anomaly in a nation of prosperity.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I want to offer my support again for the pending legislative proposal (HR 5742) that would establish and authorize a four-state regional commission for the Southwest border. It is a region facing severe economic distress, complex social and community challenges, and unique consequences as a result of various federal actions and policies. Most importantly, it is a region with great potential, hope and culture that can be a major asset to the rest of the nation.

On behalf of the members of NADO and my colleagues along the Southwest border, Mr. Chairman, thank you again for the opportunity to appear before the subcommittee today. I welcome any questions.