

A Reprint from *Tierra Grande*

NOT IN MY BIG BEND BACKYARD

By Harold D. Hunt



A showdown is taking place in West Texas over the development of a trade corridor known as La Entrada al Pacifico ("Gateway to the Pacific").

On one side, residents primarily from the Alpine and Marfa areas are fighting to stop what they consider a threat to their pristine Big Bend environment and serene quality of life. On the other side is MOTRAN, the Midland-Odessa Transportation Alliance. Together with a number of other communities in the region, MOTRAN is attempting to diversify and expand the West Texas economic base beyond agriculture and oil and gas into trade and transportation.

Caught in the crossfire is the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), which wants to craft a win-win scenario for both parties.

As more people purchase rural getaways in Texas, attempts to curtail new economic development and preserve the beauty and atmosphere of areas may become more common. However, focusing so heavily on ambiance may lead to significant cultural shifts and decreased housing affordability.

Longtime low- and middle-income residents in the Big Bend region could be adversely affected by what many newer, more affluent residents view as protecting "quality of life." This possibility should be among others considered when calculating the merits of blocking development of La Entrada.

CORRIDOR PLANS

The La Entrada al Pacifico corridor runs from Mexico's Pacific coast through the border town of Presidio to Lamesa, Texas. Governor George W. Bush designated the Texas portion of the corridor when he signed House Bill 2115 into law in 1997. The bill's intent was to promote and develop a new NAFTA trade route that could boost economic development throughout West Texas.

In the ten years since the corridor's designation, much has changed. Along with phenomenal growth in the Mexican ma-quiladoras, Asia has begun to look to Mexico as one alternative to relieve busy California ports and move freight to the highly populated northeastern United States.

At the same time, the Big Bend region has been discovered by outsiders. The "artsy" crowd, the moneyed class and an ever-increasing number of retirees continue to move into the area stretching from the tiny towns of Lajitas and Terlingua along the Rio Grande north to Marfa, Alpine and Fort Davis.

TxDOT has teamed up with HDR Engineering to conduct a formal corridor study to determine the best location for the La Entrada trade route through West Texas. The study was initiated in December 2006, and the first public hearings were held in four cities along the corridor in March 2007.

The team's mission is to identify a broad range of conceptual alternatives for the trade route, balancing infrastructure and

freight movement data with environmental concerns and input from local citizens who may be affected by the corridor. Results of the study, which will culminate in a highway alternative, rail alternative or no-build alternative, should be ready for public consideration sometime during summer 2007.

The final corridor development plan is scheduled to be completed in 2008. More information about the study can be obtained on TxDOT's website (<http://www.dot.state.tx.us>), then type "La Entrada" in the search box).

DEFINING QUALITY OF LIFE

The first round of public hearings drew large crowds from Marfa and Alpine. Many argued that development of a highway along the La Entrada route would increase crime in the area, stifle the emerging tourist trade and harm the environment.

Their concerns can be distilled to a fear that their quality of life will suffer. But individuals define quality of life in different ways. No one definition works for all. This inevitably leads to conflicting goals.

Academics who studied the effect of such conflicts provide insight into the problem.

A 1999 study conducted by Mark Somma, Scott Nikolai and Tracy Skopek (California State University-Fresno, Texas Tech University and Western Carolina University, respectively) compared attitudes toward economic development and environmental issues in Lubbock and Amarillo.

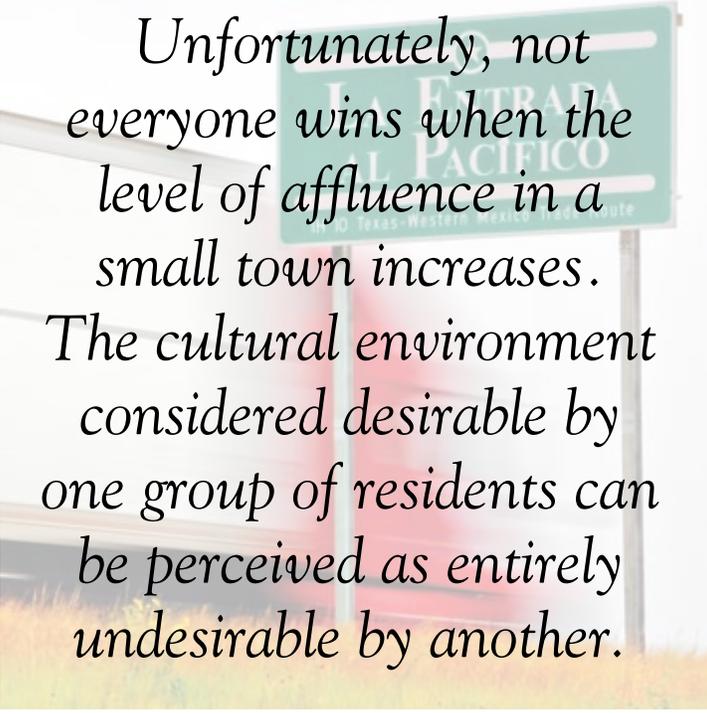
The authors discovered that Lubbock's economy was insulated by the large proportion of people employed by Texas Tech University and the University Medical Center. By contrast, Amarillo's economy had a less stable economic base, increasing citizens' desire for new economic development. The division between Alpine and Marfa residents and people from the Midland-Odessa region is similar — the two

groups have differing visions of how their communities should develop.

Somma, Nikolai and Skopek also found that support for environmental controls is more likely to come from urbanized, affluent, educated people whose basic economic needs are satisfied. Many newcomers to the Big Bend region fit this demographic.

WINNERS AND LOSERS

Unfortunately, not everyone wins when the level of affluence in a small town increases. William Falk, a University of Maryland professor, published a 1996 article showing that the cultural environment considered desirable by one group of residents can be perceived as entirely undesirable by another.



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Falk argued that wealthy residents moving into a small, relatively isolated community often increase demand for housing and property, driving up property values, which in turn drives up property taxes. These taxes are disproportionately felt by the original residents, who find it increasingly difficult to live in what used to be “their” community. As a result, these residents are sometimes forced to move to more affordable — and often less attractive — areas with a lower cost of living.

Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Bozeman, Montana, are two examples of the long-term negative effect on housing affordability in such areas. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, median household income increased by 54 percent in Santa Fe County from 1990 to 2005, while the median home value went up by 155 percent. More spectacularly, the median household income of Gallatin County, Montana, increased 97 percent while the median home value skyrocketed 210 percent during the same 15-year time frame.

In Jackson, Wyoming, and Aspen, Colorado, housing costs have been driven so high that many longtime residents were forced

to relocate to distant bedroom communities and commute to work each day. Local housing for service sector employees is so scarce in Aspen that lotteries must be held for the few housing units that become available.

TAX BITE NOT EQUAL

Property tax rates in all four of these resort communities are only one-third of those in Texas. At Texas’ higher rates, a run-up in property values in the Big Bend area could be significantly damaging for lower-income residents. Even with fixed principal and interest payments, large increases in property taxes would be an onerous burden for some.

In such an environment, service-sector residents will become harder to replace. Policemen, firemen, nurses and school teachers who live in the community before a run-up in property values can obtain mortgages based on lower home values. But the next wave of service-sector employees would find it more difficult to secure the same quality of housing.

For example, residents report that some homes in the Alpine area have sold for more than 300 percent of what they would have sold for five years ago. Prices paid in Marfa have risen even more dramatically, with some homes selling for more than 800 percent more than they could have five years ago.

Wealthy individuals buying or building homes are able to absorb increased property taxes much more easily than less affluent residents. Meanwhile, retirees moving to the area will be shielded from long-term property value increases because school tax payments on homesteads in Texas are frozen after age 65.

The median price per acre for rural land in the Trans-Pecos region increased 71 percent during 2006 alone. Those buying

tracts of land generally benefit from open space valuation, allowing them protection from high property taxes.

TOURISM VERSUS TRADE

Tourism accounts for a significant part of the economy of the four resort communities previously mentioned. Bozeman, with a population of about 27,000, and Jackson, with a population of about 9,000, each hosts about three million tourists per year.

While tourists seek out vacation spots with beautiful vistas and peaceful environments, the sheer volume of visitors may change the community. Anyone visiting Santa Fe or Aspen at the peak of tourist season knows that traffic snarls have become a part of life in those locales.

The National Park Service reported that about 398,000 people visited Big Bend National Park in 2005, a 30 percent increase from 1997. Using the park service’s rule-of-thumb of 2.8 persons per vehicle, that 30 percent increase represents an additional 33,000 vehicles per year, or about 91 more per day. Residents may consider hundreds of trucks passing through downtown Marfa and Alpine each day to be unacceptably disruptive, but large volumes of tourist traffic can be unpleasant and frustrating as well.

CHANGE IS INEVITABLE

The loss of the familiar for long-time residents living in increasingly popular communities is worrisome. Sense of place will be altered forever once sufficient outside economic activity occurs,

regardless of what that economic activity is.

History shows that individuals tend to cluster around others with similar attitudes and lifestyles, fearing change in their social mix. Unfortunately, fragmented governments coupled with a variety of economies and lifestyles have created a bipolar environment in West Texas. Residents wish to see La Entrada either fail or succeed. Little middle ground exists.

Planners have spent years studying the “before and after” fallout surrounding public actions that affect individuals’ private property rights. Harvey Jacobs of the department of urban planning at the University of Wisconsin-Madison sums up the dilemma succinctly.

“The problem,” he says, “is that Americans want both private property and limits on private property. We want freedom on our property and restrictions on other people’s property.”

One thing is certain. A cultural change is going to occur in the Big Bend region whether the La Entrada corridor is constructed or not. ➔

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SMALL COMMUNITIES that morph into “tourist towns” may experience steeply rising property values and property taxes, driving out original residents.

THE TAKEAWAY

Debate over the La Entrada al Pacifico project has centered on the pros and cons of trade versus tourism. Tourism is typically more appealing than transportation and trade-related industries, but a closer look reveals that tourism can negatively impact lower- and middle-income residents of resort towns.



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