

Testimony of Adrian Garcia, Sheriff, Harris County, Texas

Hearing on “Preventing an Economic Shock Wave: Securing the Port of Houston from Terrorist Attack” by the Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations and Management of the U.S. House Homeland Security Committee

Aug. 24, 2011

Thank you, distinguished members of the subcommittee, and thank you to my friend, the gentleman from Texas, Congressman McCaul, for inviting me to provide testimony about Harris County. I’m glad you represent part of our county. I’m glad you and I have been able to work together on several pressing issues involving the well-being and safety of our constituents. I’d like to think we’re showing Washington how to work in harmony on a bi-partisan and non-partisan basis.

You have heard from others today about how this growing, bustling, sprawling community is one of America’s most important lifelines to the world. You have at your fingertips all the facts and figures about the essential raw materials and products that move along the Houston Ship Channel, enabling us to live our everyday lives in a modern world.

We have learned that Osama bin Laden had some of the same information showing how important this lifeline is. No doubt, would-be terrorists in the United States and foreign countries know this, too. Next time they scheme to kill Americans and disrupt the energy supply of planet Earth, they may think about targeting the ground we are on today. Obviously, oil tankers, refineries and petrochemical plants are potential targets because

they have huge physical profiles, and most of them contain highly flammable substances.

I'm here as the person in charge of the law enforcement agency that has been chosen to coordinate the protection of the Ship Channel and all of its crucial assets. This may surprise some of our local audience, because the Sheriff's Office is known more for running the nation's third largest jail and patrolling an unincorporated area with the same number of residents as the city of Philadelphia. But there is no mission more important to me than preventing a terrorist attack on Harris County.

I assure you, we actively pursue this mission every day. We patrol the waterway in boats. Sometimes we patrol from the air with our fixed-wing craft, and I have been looking into adding an airborne drone to our surveillance arsenal so we can exploit the latest advances in such technology. We keep our electronic eyes trained on the Ship Channel area 24/7 with cameras, sensors, radar and other technology. Data from these high-technology devices is fed into a monitoring center that we operate on the other side of town, safe from any damage that would be caused in this zone.

We help the Coast Guard escort "High Value Asset" vessels. We join the Coast Guard and Customs in boarding ships and scanning ship hulls. We've even acquired technology from at least one other security-minded nation to help keep our eyes on the situation underwater.

Although much of our operations are highly sensitive, I can tell you that our patrols on land and on the water have responded to calls for service such as these:

- Suspicious persons and vehicles
- Security zone breeches by personal watercraft
- Sunken boats and downed power lines
- Industrial accidents
- Security card violations at plant gates

Fortunately, none of these incidents stemmed from a plot to bring us massive harm.

In addition, we have helped industrial sites evaluate their own security efforts and equipment to point out any vulnerabilities. Prevention is Job One, after all.

But we also have to prepare for a disaster, man-made or not. We work hand in hand with federal, state and local authorities not only to share intelligence, but also to conduct emergency response exercises. We're in touch with pipeline companies, railroads and emergency planners.

In a very different kind of pioneering outreach, I have established what we call the Incidence Response Forum. We use it to engage the widespread Middle Eastern and South Asian communities in the Houston area. This is a two-way communications pathway for law enforcement to share information with key civic and religious leaders.

The spirit in which we started this program several months ago was expressed very well in a homeland security memo issued by the federal government within the last three weeks. It's titled "Empowering Local Partners To Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States." Here is a brief excerpt that refers to attempts by terrorist groups to recruit American residents:

- “Countering radicalization to violence is frequently best achieved by engaging and empowering individuals and groups at the local level to build resilience against violent extremism. Law enforcement plays an essential role in keeping us safe, but so too does engagement and partnership with communities.”

But our Incidence Response Forum has other uses. By sharing information with these constituents, we help protect them against misguided attacks that may stem from terrorist acts anywhere in the world. These leaders can also help report hate crimes, help calm tensions that may arise in ethnic communities and provide feedback about the effectiveness of law enforcement by the Harris County Sheriff’s Office. We are conducting crisis response exercises with this group.

Overall: In Harris County, there is no deficit of will, dedication, cooperation, coordination and maximization of resources when it comes to protecting the Houston Ship Channel. But we do need additional funding so we can stay ahead of domestic and international terrorism threats.

A few weeks ago in Washington, I testified to one of your sister subcommittees about the bottom line in Harris County: We are not yet able to deploy personnel to the extent that this type of responsibility demands.

We received \$30 million in Homeland Security grants from the federal government for new security hardware. But the grants do not allow for investment into the most critical of resources; and that is the full-time deputies and the necessary training they need to be effective in policing a

unique environment like the Ship Channel. We'd also like to see federal funding for the kind of community engagement programs I described moments ago. We appreciate the federal government's direction on this; we'd also appreciate more resources that address the federal government's root mission of protecting the homeland.

Another financial challenge is local. The Ship Channel Security District collects assessment fees from its 100 or so private industry members and pays the money to county government in return for security services and enhancements. But the national economy has harmed property values in the Houston area, and these values are the foundation of the tax base the county uses to fund all of its operations, including my agency. The county cut its overall spending by forcing a hiring freeze. I have lost several hundred employees as a result since October 2009, with more than 125 just from our Patrol Bureau. All of my crime-fighting programs are strained; I have had to pay an exorbitant amount of overtime just to staff my jail at required state standards.

And yet, we have not been awarded any COPS grants from the Justice Department, apparently because law enforcement agencies that have had to lay off employees got first priority. I hope Congress and the administration will recognize that a forced hiring freeze - not even replacing attrition - is in fact a layoff - especially when it prevents us from deploying more crime-fighters to the national security asset known as the Houston Ship Channel. We'd welcome any kind of assistance from Washington, whether it comes from COPS grants or elsewhere.

If you will invest in us, one of the things we can give you in return is a national model for cooperation among government agencies and the business community. Eight cities border the Ship Channel Security District. Other

partners in the security district include the Texas Department of Transportation, the Metropolitan Transit Authority, the county's Office of Emergency Management and its other agencies, and the University of Houston. The security district has an 11-member board, eight of whose members come from private industry.

The Coast Guard, Merchant Marine and Customs and Border Patrol play major roles here. We also fall under the Area Maritime Security Council, which takes a regional approach to maritime and border security in Houston and nearby Galveston, Freeport and Texas City, Texas. Of course our port authority is another major partner. In your national research, you will probably find it difficult to find another locale where the job of combining private industry interests with the operations of efficient government has been carried out so successfully.

We all want to meet the highest expectations of our community, of the nation and of the world. And we need your help.

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