

## **Opening Statement of Ranking Member Filemon Vela (D-TX)**

### **Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security**

#### **Hearing: “A New Approach to Increase Trade and Security: An Examination of CBP’s Public Private Partnerships”**

**November 4, 2015**

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As a Member representing a border district, I understand and have seen firsthand the importance of maintaining infrastructure and adequate staffing at our ports of entry. I am pleased to have Mr. David Garcia, County Administrator from Cameron County, Texas, in my congressional district, joining us for the hearing today.

The Rio Grande Valley is made up of Four Counties – Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr and Willacy with a combined population of 1.3 million people who share a border with almost 2 million citizens of Mexico. Within this 99 mile span of deep South Texas lie 11 international bridges - many of which participate in the South Texas Asset Consortium – an organized effort by participating bridge communities to take advantage of the public private partnerships offered by CBP. These ports of entry help drive cross-border commerce and travel in my district and across the region.

The services rendered by Customs and Border Protection Officers at our ports of entry impact not only border communities, but also the Nation’s economy as a whole. According to CBP’s data, on a typical day in fiscal year 2014, officers processed over 1 million passengers and pedestrians at air, land, and sea ports of entry as well as inspected over 70,000 truck, rail, and maritime containers. Those numbers represent billions of dollars a day in trade and travel that drive the growth of our local, state, and national economies. Meanwhile, our ports of entry are aging.

Their infrastructure often cannot accommodate the volume of trucks, vehicles, and pedestrians that cross on a daily basis, contributing to increased wait times. Also, many of these facilities cannot be retrofitted to accommodate post-9/11 security technology. CBP previously estimated it would need \$6 billion over 10 years to modernize existing ports of entry to meet its current operational requirements, but funding has fallen far short of this need.

Staffing shortages also continue to be a problem, as CBP remains thousands of officers short of the number necessary to staff our ports of entry properly. This shortage also contributes to growing wait times, costing the U.S. economy – and American consumers – billions. CBP’s Public-Private Partnership program was established to allow for alternative funding sources to meet the growing demand for federal services at ports of entry. This program can be beneficial in providing a short-term solution to a shortage of funding for staffing and infrastructure. However, it is not a long-term solution.

CBP operations and infrastructure improvements are government functions that have traditionally been funded by federal appropriations and user fees. Under a “pay-to-play” model, ports of entry with greater resources could access more CBP services than ports of entry with equal need but fewer resources. I understand the number of applications for reimbursable service agreements and donations proposals submitted by non-Federal partners is growing. This clearly illustrates that there is a strong demand for more CBP officers and modern infrastructure at our ports of entry. But we must ensure that we as a Nation continue to fund security and facilitation needs at ports of entry.

Today, I would like to hear from our Federal witnesses about how P3 proposals are prioritized and how these programs are affecting the allocation of our limited border security resources. I am also looking forward to hearing from our witnesses representing Texas border communities about their perspective on these programs and what they predict the future impact of these programs may be for the region.

Again, I understand the appeal of these programs given current resource limitations, but maintain that Congress has a responsibility to provide CBP the resources necessary resources to fulfill its mission.