

MOVILIDAD

Del Valle

Hidalgo County Metropolitan Planning Organization

What's new at the MPO?

Busy...Busy...so much to talk about and very little space to write on! The Hidalgo County MPO had their Quadrennial Certification Review in February 2009. The review went very smooth. At the certification review, the Hidalgo County MPO was asked to ask other border areas to host the Border to Border Transportation Conference. For more information, read page 4. • The Hidalgo County MPO has also been extremely busy in submittals for the Economic Stimulus Package, American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) for both highway and transit projects. For more information, please read page 3. • The Hidalgo County MPO is also preparing to update the Metropolitan Transportation Plan which is a 25-year plan. The Plan needs to be adopted by the Transportation Policy Committee (TPC) in December 2009. The Sub-Committees will become more active in preparing the Plan for adoption, and we are looking at the months of September and/or October for public involvement. It is very important for the citizens to be involved in the transportation planning from the very beginning. • The Hidalgo County MPO is also working towards updating the Thoroughfare Plan. The cities and TxDOT has been given the deadline of May 31, 2009, to submit any updates to the Thoroughfare Plan. Once all updates have been submitted, the Hidalgo County MPO is going to turn around to submit it to Hidalgo County for their review, update and approval by the County Commissioners. Once that is received, the Thoroughfare Plan will be presented to Hidalgo County MPO TPC for approval. • The next Citizens Advisory Committee meeting is scheduled for May 7, 2009, and upon the request of the citizens, the meeting will be held at a NEW location: **Pharr Chamber of Commerce**. A big *Thank you* to Mr. Luis Bazan, President/CEO of the Pharr Chamber of Commerce, for the Citizens Advisory Committee to meet at their location. *We hope to see many of you there at the meeting!*

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Will the Valley stay afloat amid the declining border crossings?

The numbers continue to dwindle at bridge crossings around Hidalgo County. The decreases in trucks, pedestrians and vehicles are a good indication that financial troubles plaguing the national economy are finally catching up on to the Rio Grande Valley.

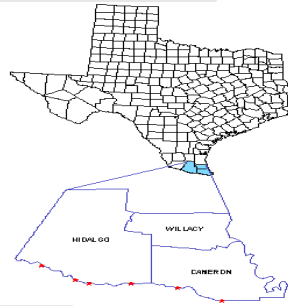
According to Jesse Medina, the Bridge Director at the Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge, traffic has continued to decline. It is down 8% from last year's level, vehicle crossings have fallen more than 80,000 and pedestrians down almost 26,000. This dip is very significant for McAllen, a primary attracting city in the Rio Grande Valley. The Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge is a money maker for the McAllen area, bringing in roughly \$13 million in revenue a year.

Economists and others around the Rio Grande Valley are attributing the declining numbers to a factor of things – border waits, security issues, the struggling US economy and the devaluation of the peso.

Turmoil in the financial markets has sent the Mexican peso falling against the US dollar. Hotels, meals, and shopping have become more expensive as the peso has lost 40% of its value since September 2008. During the Easter holiday weekend, rooms were quite easily available along 10th Street in McAllen, an unusual occurrence witnessed by the hospitality industry in the Valley.

Security is another deterring factor for tourists and the casual border crossers. Escalation of crime, drug wars, violence and theft has left Americans ruling out day trips across the border for shopping or meals. Furthermore, the long waits to cross due to heightened security serves as a deciding factor of how tourists would like to spend their time.

Continuous border crossing declines due to security, wait times and the decline of the global economy is frightful for the Rio Grande Valley's economy. The trade and tourism brings about much livelihood to our economy and further plunges may make South Texas a similar story to large metropolitan areas, a route the Valley is not ready to take.



MPO Planning Partners:

> **Alamo, Alton, Donna, Edcouch, Edinburg, Elsa, Granjeno, Hidalgo, Hidalgo County, Hidalgo County RMA, La Joya, La Villa, LRGVDC Transit, McAllen, Mercedes, Mission, Palmhurst, Palmview, Peñitas, Pharr, Progreso, Progreso Lakes, San Juan, Sullivan City, Weslaco and TxDOT**

> Ex-officio Members:

FHWA, FTA, Fish & Wildlife, McAllen Transit, Rio Grande Valley Partnership, Weslaco Chamber of Commerce, Gobierno de Tamaulipas and San Juan Economic Development

Calendar of Events

APRIL 2009

2 – Citizens Advisory Committee Meeting @ HCMPO Office, Weslaco @ 1:30pm
 7 – Technical Advisory Committee Meeting @ HCMPO Office, Weslaco @ 1:30pm
 16 – Transportation Policy Meeting @ HCMPO Office, Weslaco @ 5:30pm
 30 – Transportation Commission Meeting in Austin, Tx

MAY 2009

1 – TIP Cycle Revision
 5 – Technical Advisory Committee Meeting @ HCMPO Office, Weslaco @ 1:30pm
 7 – Citizens Advisory Committee Meeting @ Pharr Chamber of Commerce @ 1:30pm
 21 – Transportation Policy Meeting @ HCMPO Office, Weslaco @ 5:30pm
 25 – Memorial Holiday-offices closed

JUNE 2009

2 – Technical Advisory Committee Meeting @ HCMPO Office Weslaco @ 1:30pm
 4 – Citizens Advisory Committee Meeting @ HCMPO Office, Weslaco @ 1:30pm
 18 – Transportation Policy Meeting @ HCMPO Office, Weslaco @ 4:00pm
 25 – Council of Government Board Meeting @ HCMPO Office, Weslaco @ 1:30 pm

RECAP OF THE ECONOMIC RECOVERY STIMULUS BILL

“AMERICAN RECOVERY REINFORCEMENT ACT (ARRA) OF 2009”

According to President Obama, “this 787 billion dollar bill will save or create millions of jobs, increase rebuilding of infrastructure, with 37% of funding devoted to tax cuts. Furthermore, the bill will provide 126 billion to fund infrastructure projects such as road rebuilding and transportation. The bill will allocate 18% for state and local fiscal relief and 45% of the funds would go towards social services.”



The US House of Representatives passed the bill on January 28, 2009. The vote was 244 for the bill and 188 against. The bill involved about 819 billion in spending and tax cuts. There would be about 30 billion for highways and bridges and about 12 billion for mass transit. The Senate bill was expected to be more expensive. This would prove to be the case when the US Congress passed a 827 billion stimulus package. The Senate vote was 61 to 37 allowing for the bill to pass. The US Senate passed the bill late Friday, February 11, 2009 an effort to curb recession and boost the US economy.

With no time to waste Metropolitan Planning Organizations around the state were asked to submit projects that were “shovel ready” to TXDOT and in turn have them entered on to the State Transportation Improvement Plans List. This action would allow for the state of Texas to be ready for the stimulus package funding allocations for all MPO’s. TXDOT compiled a \$10 billion dollar list of “shovel ready” projects it submitted to the federal government as it mapped out plans for the stimulus package.



In anticipation of the stimulus package breakdown for this area the HCMOP called an emergency meeting of the Technical Advisory Committee. The meeting was held on Tuesday, February 17, 2009 to discuss the projects that would be “shovel ready” and submit to the Transportation Policy Committee for approval. The meeting was held and the committee agreed to three (3) projects that are “shovel ready” and were submitted for approval to the policy committee.

Based on the US Congress bill, the expected distributions were discussed and have been sent out by John Barton, Assistant Executive Director for Engineering Operations at TXDOT to all MPO’s. in the state. Distributions for our area are as follows;

Pharr District (Rehabilitation and Preventive Maintenance)	\$18,861,536
Hidalgo MPO	\$16,934,952
Brownsville MPO	\$ 7,809,328
Harlingen/SB MPO	\$ 5,218,121

The projects listed below are projects that our Hidalgo County MPO Policy Board had previously identified and prioritized. The list is as follows:

Economic Stimulus Project List

1. “I” Road, CSJ: 0921-02-032
2. Mile 2 North, CSJ: 0921-02-139
3. Westgate, CSJ: 0921-02-184

Based on MPO’s anticipated allocation of funds these projects would utilize those monies. These projects will be an improvement very much needed for these areas. Safer driving, decrease in traffic congestion, employment opportunities, and preservation of our environment will be the end result from these projects. These are key issues that the HCMPO considers during planning analysis. **We invite you to visit us on the web, meetings, or come by and see us if there are any questions about these projects.**

Border to Border Transportation Conference



The conference was kicked-off on November 18, 2008, by the TPC Chairwoman, Angie Garza, the Mayor of the City of McAllen, Richard Cortez, the Mexican Consulate, Erasmo Martinez Martinez, and Andrew A. Canon, HCMPO Director.



The conference had a great selection of sessions with speakers representing Canada, Mexico and the United States. The sessions included topics about not only border issues, but about GIS, freight, land use, etc.

On November 19, 2008, State Senator Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa was the keynote speaker at the luncheon, and he was presented with an award for all his great

efforts for the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

The conference was a 2 1/2 day event which was noted to be a conference that everyone should attend. This was the 2nd Annual for the Border to Border Transportation Conference, and in every conference we try to give everyone a small taste of the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

3rd Annual Border to Border Transportation Conference



The 3rd Annual Border to Border Transportation Conference will be held in November 2010. At the Hidalgo County MPO Certification Review, FHWA suggested for the conference to be hosted in different locations along the international borders. So, please note it in your calendars for next year, and keep an eye out for it. The Hidalgo County MPO will be sending an invitation to all International Border areas to ask who is interested in hosting next year's 3rd Annual Border to Border Transportation Conference. One of our goals has been to improve the border conference and make it better than the last by offering a variety of sessions that all transportation agencies would benefit from.

The 1st annual of the conference was reviewed to be a "stunning success", and the 2nd annual was reviewed to be "a conference everyone should attend". We are looking forward to planning for the 3rd Annual Border to Border Transportation Conference. If you are interested in being a part of the conference this time around, please do not hesitate and get in contact with Maria Champine, Hidalgo County MPO Assistant Director.



Mr. Kenneth Jones, Executive Director for the Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council (LRGVDC), received an award for all the assistance he and his staff has provided the Hidalgo County MPO throughout the years. Plus, he has been very supportive and assisted the Border to Border Transportation Conference with not only promoting the conference, but their Finance Department assisted in collecting registration fees. The LRGVDC is the administrative agent for the Hidalgo County MPO, and has been since 1993.



The evening reception for the conference was held at "El Rancho El Charco" in La Joya, Texas. As mentioned before, at the border conference people get to experience a taste of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The attendees were not only entertained by a Youth Mariachi Group from La Joya, Texas, but they were also given a tour in a wagon pulled by horses.



The participants had an opportunity to visit and tour the Foreign Trade Zone to have an idea of how shipments are handled before they cross International Bridge. To further that knowledge, a roundtable discussion on freight issues in the U.S. and Mexico.



The 3rd Annual Border to Border Transportation Conference is a conference where people from not only international border areas such as U.S./Canada and U.S./Mexico but people from all over the U.S. get together to discuss ideas, projects and issues. We hope that people go back to their office with fresh innovative ideas which will also encourage the implementation of innovative technologies to improve regional efficiency.

Another goal is for the Border to Border Transportation Conference to assist in the coordination of the transportation planning process with in and between countries such as Canada and Mexico. By being a part of the conference, will allow to facilitate, promote and/or develop a communication between entities that will move towards the exchange of information.

Please keep an eye out and mark it on your calendars to attend the 3rd Annual Border to Border Transportation Conference scheduled for November 2010! Join us in this great event that seems to be growing every year! Hope to see you there...

Light Rail in the Valley?

With the downturn in the economy, endless fluctuations in gas prices, and a shift in attitude towards "being green", many cities in Texas have focused on developing public transportation as a way to relieve the stress of congestion on the highway system. Houston, a city known for extensive urban sprawl and congestion, developed a light rail line, known as the METRORail in 2004. Dallas also has developed a light rail line, known as DART. Austin is also trying to push and develop some form of rail to relieve its strangled road system.



So the question is, when will Light Rail come to the Valley? As the individual cities in the Rio Grande Valley keep growing, our highways will continue to become more congested. The proposed Hidalgo County Loop will perhaps bring relief, and expand options for truckers in particular, the future of Hidalgo County and the Rio Grande Valley has to have expanded forms of public transportation. The answer, as many cities are discovering, is light rail. Not only does Light Rail help relieve congestion, but it helps the environment because it produces zero pollution. Imagine having a rail system span from Mission to Harlingen, or perhaps further, to South Padre or Brownsville. What about a rail system for the Mission-McAllen-

Edinburg area?

In the late 19th century, electric street cars were the dominant form of public transportation. However, Henry Ford and the Model T changed that. Cars became mass produced and available at increasingly cheaper prices. Streetcars, receiving less and less support as the years went by, were eventually pushed out of existence by the growing auto industry. During the 1950s, huge highway initiatives were created, and a massive interstate highway system made the outlying areas available for land development. Today, we're seeing the result of handing our urban landscapes to the automobile. The personal independence of having a car is still highly valued, especially for families that want safety, reliability, and room. But spikes in gas prices, congestion, increases in vehicle miles traveled, and urban sprawl have shown us the downside of infinite mobility expansion.



Right now, Highway 83 and US 281 are the main expressways to get around the Valley. As population increases, more cars will inevitably be using the freeway, meaning more congestion. To see examples of this, look no further than Houston and Austin. Austin suffers from strained highways as major thoroughfares, which prevent easy access to its active and lively downtown. Interstate 35 is constantly bogged down, as truckers make their way across the city, and commuters from Round Rock and San Marcos make their daily journeys to work and back. Houston has the 610 loop with Interstate 10 and 45 crisscrossing through the downtown area. Houstonians commute downtown from several suburban regions beyond 610, such as Clear Lake and Pearland. Houston, more so than Austin, has suffered from extensive low density urban sprawl, the same type of sprawl we see here in the Valley with strip mall development. As residents of the Valley, we must ask ourselves, are we headed down the same path?

The Good, The Bad and...Well, The Facts



The regular session for the 81st Legislature is quickly winding down to a close as it reaches the end of its 140 days on June 1st, 2009. Senators and representatives from across the state have been working diligently to pass key transportation bills that will impact local communities in the way of safety, finance, environment and operations.

Bills regarding the membership of the Texas Transportation Commission have been interesting to watch. After recommendations made under the Sunset Advisory Commission, representatives have varied recommendations as to the make-up of the TTC. Some advocate for a 15 member Commission in which member would come from roughly same sized districts that are based on population. Other bills promote a one man commission, thus making certain that accountability to decisions and actions is clear.

In regards to finance, the rate of the state gasoline tax is a hot topic. Some bills seek to index the motor fuel tax to the annual Producer Price Index while others seek to allocate it to different projects such as county roads.

Representatives across Texas are placing an emphasis on safety this session. We are seeing many bills regarding the use of wireless devices while driving. Some are requiring that using wireless devices, reading or responding to text messages be prohibited. Many representatives are also seeking to prohibit the use of wireless devices in school zones in order to eliminate accidents and increase driver attention.

Another element to safety brings about a proposed requirement to local municipalities and metropolitan planning organizations. These bills seek to make planning authorities include accommodations to bicyclists, pedestrians and mass transit in their planning efforts and documents.

Similarly, several representatives are looking to change road conditions for pedestrians and bicyclists by making it mandatory for vehicles to pass only at a safe distance.

On the home front, the legislative agenda approved by the Commissioner's Court is as follows:

- Grant the county to have zoning authority when related to development within an established Transportation Reinvestment Zone

- Appropriate funding for US 281 projects

The Commissioner's Court is also supporting a bill proposed by Senator Hinojosa which gives counties the ability to impose additional vehicle registration and road/bridge fees for mobility projects. Currently, the fee for Hidalgo County which was authorized by bills HB 3437 and SB 1888 from the last session is set at \$10. The new bill (SB 294) proposes a vehicle registration fee of up to \$50.

10th Annual Dragonfly Days

The tenth annual Dragonfly Days weekend is a chance to see why "dragonflying" is becoming as popular as birding in some places. The event takes place in Weslaco May 21-24 and is sponsored by the Estero Llano Grande State Park World Birding Center site and the Valley Nature Center in Weslaco, Texas. This is a great event for all Valley residents to enjoy the wonder of dragonflies and damselflies. The festivities include dragonfly nature walks at several nature parks with guides, and presentations about these fascinating creatures. For ticket information and more information, call the Valley Nature Center at 956-969-2475 or Estero Llano Grande State Park at 956-565-3919, or visit www.valleynaturecenter.org.





Hidalgo County Metropolitan
Planning Organization
510 S. Pleasantview Dr.
Weslaco, Texas 78596

(956) 969-5778
(956) 969-5821 fax
www.hcmpto.org

If you wish to be added to our mailing list, please contact the MPO office and speak with Maria Champine or send an email at info@hcmpto.org

HCMPO also offers a Spanish edition of this newsletter!



City of Hidalgo—Modern-day Hidalgo was first settled by Spanish colonists led by José de Escandón in about 1749. The colony was known by multiple names: La Habitación, Rancho San Luis, and San Luisito. In 1852, John Young settled in the area and renamed the town Edinburgh after his place of birth, Edinburgh, Scotland; Edinburgh became the county seat of Hidalgo County. The town was incorporated in 1876, and its name was changed to Hidalgo in 1885.

It is located across the Rio Grande (Rio Bravo del Norte) from the Mexican city of Reynosa, Tamaulipas. It also serves as the fourth largest Port of Entry to the United States.

According to the United States Census Bureau, the city has a total area of 4.4 miles², of which 0.1 miles² is water.

In 1990, when newspaper headlines across America announced the invasion of the Africanized Honey Bee (also known as the "Killer Bee") in the United States of America, the city of Hidalgo was where it was first spotted. In honor of this, the citizens of Hidalgo commissioned, sculpted and proudly displayed a ten-foot tall, 2000 pound, full-color statue of the feared "Killer Bee." This structure has since been visited, photographed and written about by no less than 100,000 locals, tourists, journalists and passer-bys to the area.

The City of Hidalgo's two principal annual events are its *Festival of Lights* during December, when the city's plazas are ablaze with a million lights, and *BORDERFEST*, a major event of border music, heritage and culture at Dodge Arena, which attracts over 50,000 people the first weekend in March.

