

Lucio Vision Realized in MPO Merger

Austin, TX – Senator Eddie Lucio (D-Brownsville), authored an op-ed in March 2018 encouraging the merger of the three Metropolitan Planning Organizations of the Rio Grande Valley. That vision was realized in the recently created Rio Grande Valley MPO. “I’m so proud of the local leadership of the Rio Grande Valley for taking, yet another forward-thinking step at regionalism for the benefit of all of South Texas,” said Lucio.

Rio Grande Valley merger expected to help land more road dollars*

Taken as a whole, the Rio Grande Valley would rank among the nation's top 50 metro areas, which would give it more swagger in attracting business and tax dollars.

But Valley leaders have largely resisted combining efforts, instead competing among themselves for projects such as a medical school or a new bridge to Mexico.

Gov. Greg Abbott's June 14 signing of a bill to create a regional metropolitan planning organization for the Valley signals a sea change for what has essentially been a region of self-protective domains.

“Right now, I’m the county judge of a county that has 22 cities,” Hidalgo County Judge Richard Cortez said. “So, you know, then within my county we’ve got 22 cities basically competing with one another.”

Beyond its internal contests, the county was competing with Cameron County to the south, making for a sort of tug of war between the upper and lower Valley.

What changed? Realization that combining what had been three metropolitan planning organizations — federally-mandated transportation policy-making organizations — into one would create a body that represented well over a million people. MPOs funnel federal dollars to road projects its members have approved.

As state Sen. Eddie Lucio, D-Brownsville, wrote in a March 2018 opinion piece in *The (McAllen) Monitor*, combining the MPOs into one could make the Valley eligible for the billions of dollars of discretionary Texas Department of Transportation funding.

So far, that money has gone only to the state’s top metros: Dallas-Fort Worth, Austin-San Marcos, Houston-Galveston, Austin-San Marcos, and San Antonio-New Braunfels-Seguin.

“Although 25 MPOs exist in our state, only four have overcome parochial barriers and unified within their region to strengthen their ability to leverage increased road and highway dollars,” Lucio wrote.

A merger would raise the Valley’s share of one pool of funds by about \$110 million over 10 years, the Valley Morning Star recently reported.

But it would also make the Valley for the first time eligible for a share of an approximately \$1 billion-a-year pot of money earmarked for discretionary spending that usually goes to the big four.

“The formula for distributing funds for roads and bridges is basically density,” Cortez said. “The more dense you are, the more cars on the road, the more need for mobility. The problem that we were having initially is nobody wanted to lose anything and nobody wanted to lose control.”

A unified approach could also help attract private-sector investment dollars, Cortez said.

“If we’re the fifth largest market MPO in Texas, then obviously we’re the fifth largest market for anybody selling anything,” he said. “That hopefully will attract investments to the area.”

Sen. Juan “Chuy” Hinojosa, D-McAllen, said it took at least 35 drafts of agreements to get everybody on board

But ultimately, he said, local officials knew the region needed to step up its game to keep up with its breakneck growth.

A population that during the 1980s numbered between 500,000 and 600,000 is now at about 1.5 million. It’s projected to reach 3 million by 2040.

“The need for infrastructure was very obvious.. and need for expansion of highways,” Hinojosa said. “Three MPOs quite frankly really weakened our voice. At the same time, infrastructure wasn’t just needed in McAllen — it’s all interconnected.”

Harlingen Mayor Chris Boswell said Valley leaders themselves call it the “Friday Night Lights mentality.”

“Lots of squabbling and competition and that kind of thing,” Boswell said. “So there was a lot of concern about what an agreement would look like, how the organization would operate, what the government structure was... In earnest, it took two to three years of getting lawyers involved and preparing agreements, rejecting agreements. It was a negotiation.”

One of the toughest holdouts was Brownsville Mayor Tony Martinez.

Martinez said he was wary of mergers because of glitches with the 2015 merger of the University of Texas-Brownsville and University of Texas-Pan American into what became the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley.

As with the MPO agreement, the merger was all about money, in this case eligibility for Permanent University Funds.

Martinez said the location of a medical school, deemed key to raising the Valley's low number of physicians, also caused some heartburn. In the end, officials reached an agreement in which students would do their first two years in the upper Valley (Edinburg) and second two years in the lower Valley (Harlingen).

Among other provisions, the final MPO deal carefully allocates votes between counties and cities, and mandates that the chairmanship is alternated between counties.

"The MPO is actually a good thing," Martinez said. "It wouldn't be unless we had done all the things that we did in making sure we had parity."

It's a definite shift in attitude, said Cameron County Judge Eddie Treviño.

"It's been a long time coming, and sometimes we've probably been our own worst enemy by haggling or arguing over provincial things and city limit signs and county limit signs," he said. "The rest of the state, the rest of the country, hell, the rest of the world looks at us as one region. And we need to start operating that way."

* Brezosky, Lynn. "Rio Grande Valley merger expected to help land more road dollars." *San Antonio Express-News*, 27 June 2019, <https://www.expressnews.com/business/article/Rio-Grande-Valley-merger-expected-to-help-land-14057219.php>