

Lucio Reaffirms His Vision For RGV Commuter Transit

Austin, TX – Senator Eddie Lucio (D-Brownsville), was quoted recently, reaffirming his vision for light rail in the Rio Grande Valley. “As a growing region, I can’t imagine a better opportunity to connect our communities and support the students of UTRGV,” said Lucio.

Valley lawmakers: We should involve Elon Musk in our light rail project*

BROWNSVILLE, RGV – UT-Rio Grande Valley Vice President Veronica Gonzales says she was only joking when she suggested asking Elon Musk to get involved the Valley’s light rail project.

However, state lawmakers from the region say they like her idea.

“Getting Elon Musk involved would be awesome. Obviously he is a world-renowned figure and he is doing things to revolutionize how we live and travel,” said state Rep. Eddie Lucio, III, of San Benito.

Asked if leaders in the Valley know him well enough to engage with him on the topic, Lucio said: “I would say we have a connection with him.”

Gonzales, a former state representative, made her suggestion when she moderated a discussion on the 86th Legislature. The event was hosted by the RGV Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and held at the Casa de Palmas hotel in McAllen.

Gonzales asked a transportation question of state Rep. Armando Martinez of Weslaco. Martinez brought up one of his top bills during the recently ended legislative session, House Bill 71. The legislation creates a regional transit authority for the Valley that could one day usher in light rail.

“We have SpaceX coming and we will be having all these rocket launches. Maybe we can get Elon Musk to build us some rail down here,” Gonzales said.

After the Rio Grande Guardian reported on it, Gonzales said she was only joking. However Rep. Lucio said the UTRGV leader’s suggestion has merit.

“Hats off to Veronica for thinking outside the box. I think it would need to be the state of Texas, all of us, as Texans, coming together and figuring out how to do this. It is a statewide issue and it is extremely expensive from the point of view of acquisition of land and right of way. But maybe we already have rail that we are just not utilizing. I would love to do it. They (Mando and Veronica) are on to something.”

Rep. Lucio said the United States and the Valley could learn a thing or two from Europe.

“When I was young and had more time I went to Europe. I was in Spain for about three weeks and the main form of transportation I used was trains. It was amazing to experience that because we are very limited in that form of transportation in the United States,” Lucio said.

“I thought, wow, what an incredible low-cost way and environmentally friendly way for us to be able to get around and I came back and I started research how we could do that in the United States. It just seemed it was so expensive and part of it was the acquisition of land. It is not necessarily the building of the rail or the purchasing of the actual cars. It is the acquisition of the land. I do not know how to overcome that but if we can figure that out I would really love to get on train with my family and go to McAllen for the night or go to San Antonio for the weekend. Then, with self-driving cars coming in, we get there and we hail an Uber or we get in a car and wow. what a low-cost experience.”

Rep. Lucio was interviewed by the *Rio Grande Guardian* following a review of the 86th Legislature at a luncheon hosted by the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce and held at the Brownsville Events Center.

State Sen. Eddie Lucio of Brownsville spoke at the luncheon. Interviewed afterwards by the *Rio Grande Guardian*, Lucio said he liked the idea of approaching Elon Musk to help with the Valley’s light rail project. In fact, he sponsored HB 71 in the Senate. Like his son, Rep. Lucio, Sen. Lucio said he was impressed with how much light rail is integrated into Europe’s mass transit system.

“Light rail was my big issue when I returned from a visit to Austria. I was the one who brought it to the attention of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council. I felt it was necessary to do a study” Sen. Lucio said.

Sen. Lucio pointed out that it took he and Rep. Martinez several sessions to pass regional transit authority legislation.

“We are one Valley and one family. We need to make sure we have up to date studies on transit issues that the connect the Valley in terms of education, health care, tourism, business, especially education because our young people move back and forth between our institutions of higher learning,” Sen. Lucio said.

“We need something affordable that will positively impact our region, because we have a high rate of poverty. I am elated that the issue we started to talk about four to six years ago finally met with the approval of others in Austin. Now we have got a clear vision of what we would like to see happen. I am going to depend on the LRGVDC to take the issue and work with the issue to take it to the point where we can find the necessary means of funding to create the transit system that we need.”

Sen. Lucio said if more legislation is needed to make light rail happen in the Valley, he will author it.

“When I traveled through Austria to Vienna I traveled through many towns on light rail. I felt that that system could work very well in what we call the Magic Valley. All of our communities are so close together. We have some infrastructure already in place for light rail. But, remember, the transit authority is not just for light rail. It incorporates our bus system and any form of transportation system for the public. It will work to give us the services we need for the people of the Rio Grande Valley and for the thousands that come to the Valley each year, such as the Winter Texans and the tourists and those that come here for business.”

Asked specifically about reaching out to Musk, the founder of SpaceX and Tesla, Sen. Lucio said:

“I favor reaching out to anyone who can help us along, especially when it comes to finance. Hopefully we can tap into some grant money from the federal government. Maybe there are some private monies that are available to us for economic development purposes, that can go to transit issues. We need the expertise to find that and make that a reality.

“But, yes, Elon Musk can help us if he chooses to do so. And there are other people with deep pockets in our country that I think could establish interest in our area of the state and country and could be players in this issue that we feel is so important.”

State Rep. Alex Dominguez of Brownsville also spoke at the Brownsville Chamber event. Interviewed afterwards by the *Rio Grande Guardian*, Dominguez spoke about Musk’s Hyperloop idea.

“The Hyperloop project that Elon Musk has been pushing is one that our government scientists came up with back in the 1970s. The real obstacle to the Hyperloop project is not one of technology. The technology already exists. It is one of political will. Are we willing to buy out the property needed to build the Hyperloop project?” Dominguez said.

“We also have one additional problem down here in South Texas and that is our water table. It does not take very much digging before you hit water so that would be a problem that would have to be addressed through technology as well. I think what we really need to be doing down here is looking at different ways to move people from point A to point B.”

Dominguez said he has mixed feelings about bringing rail back into Brownsville.

“I have mixed feelings on this because Cameron County worked really hard to get rid of the train that was running all through town and now we want to put another train in there. I think with some proper logistical coordination we can make it so that trains facilitate the movement of people from the upper Valley to the lower Valley. It would certainly be great for our college students.”

Dominguez added: “What I am looking for is a greater change in the mindset of people, encouraging them to use mass transit as a whole. Not just light rail but also our bus systems. Brownsville and the Rio Grande Valley have wonderful buses, some that have Internet and air conditioning and it important we have those as an asset and people don’t feel they can’t go from point A to point B. I think with some proper investigation and opinion and public input we can come up with a mass transit plan for the Rio Grande Valley that would be a mixture of light rail and commuter busing.”

* Taylor, Steve. "Valley lawmakers: We should involve Elon Musk in our light rail project." *Rio Grande Guardian*, 2 August 2019, <https://riograndeguardian.com/valley-lawmakers-we-should-involve-elon-musk-in-our-light-rail-project/>