

## **Chapter 6. Lessons Learned and Recommendations**

The Lower Rio Grande Valley–Tamaulipas Border Master Plan (referred to in this document as the Border Master Plan) was the third binational effort on the U.S.-Mexico border. The study team followed a similar approach to that used for the California–Baja California Border Master Plan, which was completed in September 2008 and is currently being updated, and the Laredo–Coahuila/Nuevo León/Tamaulipas Border Master Plan, which was completed in 2012. Border master plans serve the important function of identifying and prioritizing planned projects on the U.S.-Mexico border. Border master plans aim to:

- Identify binational POE and multimodal project priorities.
- Secure commitment from stakeholders to implement priority projects.
- Ensure continued dialogue among agencies.

This chapter summarizes the lessons learned in the development of this Border Master Plan, proposes a process for institutionalizing a dialogue among agencies, and includes several recommendations for consideration in the development of future border master plans and updates of border master plans.

### **6.1 Lessons Learned**

The successful development of border master plans requires two elements:

- Stakeholder participation and commitment.
- Adequate technical data/information.

#### **6.1.1 Stakeholder Participation**

More than 220 stakeholders from 65 agencies at the U.S. and Mexico Federal, State, county/municipal, and city levels; 5 railroad companies; and 18 border partners (represented by 33 participants) contributed to the development of the Border Master Plan. Border partners include agencies and companies, such as the various Economic Development Corporations and the North American Development Bank.

Border partners could attend all meetings and provide input at the meetings. Similar to the California–Baja California Border Master Plan and the Laredo–Coahuila/Nuevo León/Tamaulipas Border Master Plan, stakeholder participation was obtained through the formation of two committees: the PAC and the TWG.

For border master plans to be successful, stakeholder participation in and commitment to the development of these border master plans are critical. The study team succeeded at this by:

- Maintaining an updated contact list.
- Hosting regular meetings.
- Using technology and an innovative approach to provide each stakeholder agency with an equal voice in developing the ranking framework that was used to prioritize projects.

Over the course of the study period, the study team made a concerted effort to maintain an updated contact list. The contact list was reviewed and regularly updated to reflect changes in stakeholder representation (e.g., mayors, county judges, and Mexican State representatives changed because of term limits and staff turnover). The study team approached and briefed all new stakeholders on the Border Master Plan’s objectives and the study team’s progress in developing it.

The study team hosted six stakeholder meetings in different cities in the Focused Study Area over the course of the study period (see Appendix D). To accommodate stakeholders that were not bilingual, simultaneous translation was available at all the stakeholder meetings. Providing bilingual, simultaneous translation is an essential component in ensuring stakeholder participation.

Since the prioritization of planned projects can be sensitive and contentious, it was critical to design a stakeholder agency involvement process that was inclusive and ensured the participation of all agencies and companies responsible for the planning, programming, construction, and/or management of POE projects and the transportation infrastructure serving these POEs. Furthermore, obtaining endorsement of the Border Master Plan and ensuring commitment to the implementation of the Border Master Plan’s priorities were essential. Therefore, a process was developed to provide each stakeholder agency with an equal voice in developing and endorsing the ranking framework used for project prioritization.

Classroom Performance System technology allowed for anonymous voting and facilitated reaching a consensus on categories, category weights, criteria, and criterion weights. The process worked as follows: The stakeholders were provided with a voting device (the i>Clicker) that allowed them to vote on the importance of a specific criterion in prioritizing a project. The ranking scale was from A to E, where A was extremely important and E was extremely unimportant. The votes were anonymous, but the study team could track how many stakeholders voted. Once the votes were cast, the results were displayed, and the study team facilitated a discussion about the voting results. Stakeholders were then asked to vote again, and the process continued until substantial agreement developed (e.g., two-thirds of the respondents agreed) or until the voting results did not change from one round to the next. This approach allowed all stakeholder agencies to participate in the development of the ranking framework.

### **6.1.2 Technical Data/Information**

Detailed technical data and information are required in the development of border master plans to describe the current and future demand for existing border infrastructure and to enable the prioritization of planned future projects. Thus, given adequate technical data and information to prioritize projects, border master plans provide a detailed inventory of planned project priorities in a Focused Study Area. High-priority projects included in a binational border master plan also provide a powerful argument when competing for transportation funding at the Federal and State levels, as well as for private and local funds.

As was done in the California–Baja California Border Master Plan and the Laredo–Coahuila/Nuevo León/Tamaulipas Border Master Plan, the study team developed a detailed inventory of all transportation facilities serving the POEs in the Focused Study Area. To facilitate comparison with these border master plans, the study team collected similar descriptive and performance data for 2010 and used the TxDOT AADT growth rates to estimate facility usage and the LOS by 2030. Specifically, the study team collected information about the location of the roads, roadway lengths, number of accidents, number of lanes, AADT, and share of truck traffic. The LOSs for 2010 and 2030 were calculated using methods defined by the *Highway Capacity Manual* (2010) and data provided by TxDOT. For the existing POEs, the study team developed a detailed bridge inventory that included descriptions of the current facilities, hours of operation, crossings by mode (i.e., pedestrians, POVs, buses, commercial trucks, and rail containers), toll rates levied, and primary transportation facilities serving the POEs.

In addition, the study team collected the following technical data for the planned POE projects: project location, current facility and planned improvements, year the project becomes operational, cost data and funding status, number of fully operational lanes/rail track before and after project completion, technology used to improve throughput, existing and future crossing wait time, annual daily crossings before and after project completion, diversion of commercial traffic, land availability, current phase of the project, accident rate, diversion of non-radioactive hazmat, a qualitative assessment of the wider geographic and general development benefits of the project, and the extent to which binational coordination has occurred.

For the planned road and interchange projects, the study team collected the following technical data: project location, planned improvements, year the project becomes operational, cost data and funding status, existing and future number of lanes, LOS before and after project completion, number of POEs served, connectivity, AADT before and after project completion, percentage of trucks, estimated demand after 20 years, land availability, current phase of the project, accident rate, diversion of non-

radioactive hazardous materials (hazmat), and a qualitative assessment of the wider geographic and general development benefits of the project.

For planned rail projects, the study team collected the following technical data: project location, current facility and planned improvements, year the project becomes operational, cost data and funding status, existing and future number of tracks, whether the project is a rail yard project or involves track relocation, average delay time, relocation of rail traffic, elimination of rail crossings, average annual daily rail cars before and after project completion, existing and future cross-border tonnage by rail, additional hours of interchange, land availability, current phase of the project, accident rate, diversion of non-radioactive hazmat, and a qualitative assessment of the wider geographic and general development benefits of the project. However, no planned rail projects were submitted for inclusion in the Border Master Plan.

For planned marine port projects, the study team collected the following technical data: project location, current facility and planned improvements, year the project becomes operational, cost data and funding status, vessel size accommodation, channel capacity, number of docks before and after project completion, existing and future total annual tonnage, cross-border tonnage before and after project completion, land availability, current phase of the project, diversion of non-radioactive hazmat, and a qualitative assessment of the wider geographic and general development benefits of the project.

The more data/information provided for a planned project, the more opportunities the planned project had to receive a score—and the higher the likelihood that the planned project would be ranked higher than a similar project for which limited data were provided. Very limited information was available for the planned Mexican projects, which prevented the development of a list of binational project priorities. Instead, the projects were prioritized for the United States and Mexico separately.

## **6.2 Recommendations**

### **6.2.1 Institutionalizing the Dialogue**

Border master plans should be updated when there are major changes in the content of the border master plans. For example, if a number of priority projects have been completed or if a number of planned projects have emerged since the border master plan was developed, the plan will need updating. This keeps the contents and inventories current and allows the border master plan to continue to represent the region's vision and goals. The timing of the updates may thus differ from region to region.

It is recommended that the PAC convene every year to determine the need for updates. Information on all completed priority projects and any planned projects that have emerged since the completion of the previous Border Master Plan should be presented. This presentation will allow the PAC to make an informed decision about the need to update the planned project inventory and technical data of the Border Master Plan. Similarly, the PAC will be able to determine the need for a comprehensive update to the plan. A comprehensive update would involve revisiting the planning horizons (short, medium, and long term), the geographic boundaries of the study area (Focused Study Area and Area of Influence), the socio-economic data, cross-border travel demand changes, and the ranking framework that was used to prioritize projects. Finally, it is recommended that a representative of the PAC or TxDOT's International Relations Office make regular informative presentations to the JWC to discuss the need to update the existing Border Master Plan (as determined by the PAC) or to report on any in-progress Border Master Plan updates.

### **6.2.2 Development of Future Border Master Plans**

The study team offers the following observations and recommendations for consideration in development of future border master plans or updates of this Border Master Plan:

- Three of the four U.S. States on the southern border have overseen the development of border master plans. To remain a viable planning tool, these plans must reflect each region's needs, interests, and priorities. If the ultimate goal is to establish U.S.-Mexico project priorities, it is recommended that regions follow a similar—although not necessarily the same—approach in the development of all border master plans.
- Border master plans currently provide detailed inventories of planned project priorities in a Focused Study Area. Two enhancements to the scope of work for updating the border master plans should be considered: identify funding opportunities for high-priority projects in the Focused Study Area, and develop technical tools to evaluate the potential regional impact of investments. Specifically, the feasibility of developing technical tools (models) to determine how investment in a specific project would impact demand (e.g., diverting traffic to other crossings)—and therefore the need or priority of other planned projects—should be determined. The implementation of some of the identified high-priority projects could thus potentially reduce the need or delay the need for implementing some of the other high-priority projects. As currently developed, border master plans do not quantify or model the demand impact of an investment in specific projects on other crossings or transportation infrastructure in the region.

- Ensure participation by actively reaching out to stakeholders. Keep stakeholders engaged in the development of border master plans, ensure a process where every stakeholder has an equal voice in the selection of the criteria that will be used to prioritize projects, and make all reports and information disseminated available in both English and Spanish. Ultimately, continued support for development of border master plans will only prevail if results can be demonstrated—by the funding and implementation of high-priority projects identified by the border master plan.