Citizens Forum Board Members in attendance:
4 Board members

USIBWC Staff in attendance:
3 Staff members

Members of the public in attendance:
16 Public members

Opening Remarks:
At 3:00 p.m., Melisa Gonzalez, Citizens Forum Co-chair, convened USIBWC Mercedes LRGFO’s Quarterly Citizens Forum. Ms. Gonzalez began with a short welcome and allowed attending board members and those in attendance to introduce themselves. She then introduced the first guest speaker, Eric Davila, P.E., to discuss the Hidalgo County Regional Mobility Authority Long Range Plan.

Presentation One: Hidalgo County Regional Mobility Authority Long Range Plan
When you talk about development in the Rio Grande Valley you talk about drainage, the urbanization that those challenges bring and along with it you have to bring transportation solutions. Transportation is the confluence of all those areas of concern into one. People like us who are in charge of delivering infrastructure have to take all that into account and that’s why we present to the public to talk about how these projects might help them out.

Our charge is very simple, we are going to discuss a couple of key projects in our short-term strategic plan. The first one is the 365 Toll way project, it’s a grandfathered project that was already on the books as a proposed toll road. Statewide a couple of things happened that kind of shy away from toll roads as a first option. When it comes to a roadway agency end user fees are the most equitable way to try and garner the financing necessary to get projects done. Then you have the other way, the holy grail, free money from the feds or the state. Free money being money already collected from Texans that paid their taxes. We basically get 95% of the taxes that we dish out the federal government back to us in the highway funds that the state then allocates to local projects. So those as you can imagine are harder to fight for. So sometimes, we have a glut of free money sometimes a shortfall and tolling the end user fees comes back into the conversations, because at the end of the day some of these roadways are to facilitate not just local traffic but also international traffic. So not only do we have our own growth to contend with we have the nonstop growth at the bridges for international trade.

There is a long-term project we are developing called the west loop project. All these are being done in concert with the state that’s the Texas dept of Transportation. There is also an I69 connecter, these projects are out to the west and the north. As you can imagine the great care right now is to take care of the core of Hidalgo County, which is that area Mission, McAllen, San Juan, Alamo, Weslaco, and Mercedes. They kind of forms this population triangle where a lot of the population center sits and that’s where we have the highways right now, but we are fixing to need alternate routes as we are getting to capacity with some of the roadways that we did 40 or 50 years ago. There are some new developments we have had; we keep tabs on an overweight network for Hidalgo county. Here we have a network
throughout the county which has provided some other possibilities for funding. When you get to talk about trucks you talk about the wear and tear on the road. The rub isn’t so much in constructing these projects, it is maintaining them that really becomes the challenge.

The projects I’m here to talk about are essentially hugging the floodway here on the 365-toll way, it goes from the Anzalduas port of entry to the Pharr bridge. There is a project that we are clearing for environmental to the east of that. It is called the International bridge trade corridor, IBTC and that connects from Dicker Road and San Juan Road on the 365 projects over to Interstate 2. The 365 project was the first one I alluded to as being on the books and is ready to go. We have bought the right of way all the way from Anzalduas to Pharr bridge. It is about 98% because there is still a few parcels that we have agreements and once the check clears we will have that right of way. We have a floodway bridge that we spent a lot of time coordinating with El Paso and Mercedes office and we have our letter of no objection to go across there. We have specifications within our construction contract that essentially incorporate the Army Corp of Engineer design standard for levee construction. Because we are getting close to the levees and kind of encroaching in some areas to make this alignment fit. We worked a lot with them, and we got through it, but needless to say it was very complicated. This alignment has it challenges, but as you can see it is going to go across three international bridges. You have the potential for a rail bridge as the city of Mission is making a play for putting a rail bridge out in the west area. It would make the segment that we haven’t bought the right of way for viable if the rail bridge comes to fruition. We have a lot of potential for this, we have a gap on this project of about 30 million dollars. We are running this project through the local metropolitan planning organization and we are hoping to hear from them very soon as to either they will or will not fund it. If they don’t fund it we are going to have to value engineer the project down to get the project done. We did build a segment three overpass project; it was really our first construction project done. It was probably one of the biggest local projects let in Hidalgo county from the standpoint of transportation. The other big local let was a $200-million-dollar levee rehabilitation they did back in 2007/2008 for that phase 1 of border infrastructure. This one is a $22-million-dollar overpass project that would connect the Pharr bridge into the 365 RMA project. We built the east and west improvements along Military highway from Cage Blvd. to Stewart Rd. From the Border and Safety Inspection facility which is really a Texas DPS facility for inspection in the future when they start running the trucks through there and letting out the truck traffic into this area. From the very beginning we have always taken into account heavy truck traffic going across these projects. The project itself is a divided highway, you have two lanes going in each direction. A total of four lanes from eight lanes built and when you have frontage roads you have two lane frontage roads kind of like how you see the expressway right now. We have an MOU specifically with Hidalgo County Drainage district 1 to provide our outfalls. We designed to TxDot standards, so everything is designed to the 100 year, they checked the 100, designed to the 50. We impound our waters and release to county standards which in this case is 10-year event, but we hold any and all water we generate during any event. We are constricted to how we can release it. We have a timeline what is really a 255 million construction project out the door, so its no easy task, but we are just about there. If we are able to get the gap funding, we will release the project as we have already designed it.

To the east we are clearing the IBTC project. That one on the books is probably about 67% complete from an environmental standpoint. We are trying to get clearance, its actually going to be closer to the middle of 2020. We have already had public meetings, especially the areas as you get close to Interstate 2, where you have more of the relocation of residences, plus individual town halls with each community affected. We want to get ahead of any issues and provide one source of information for the public. We follow federal standards, so we follow the uniform relocation act when it comes to purchases of right of way. IBTC is being cleared as a non-toll project as the state is saying that it doesn’t want to fund toll projects. The cross section here looks very different as we don’t build main lanes because we can’t afford them in the non-toll conditions. The west leg is essentially frontage roads. The north leg we do provide some main
lanes because we are moving through a tight area. We don’t provide frontage roads but provide connectivity north and south. The east leg referred to as the Donna connector is essentially a frontage road with one lane each way. This is the realities of being in a non-toll environment, we have to build less facility. We are going to clear the right of way and build the drainage for the long term; it’s just we can’t put as much pavement in the short term.

The West Loop is the long-term project. The reason we have it in our plan is because it’s part of the loop, we haven’t started environmental quite yet. There is potential for rail bridge, if the city of Mission is able to clear the right of way for the area in which they already have a Presidential permit. They are trying to get their footprint on either side of the bridge clear so they can get a rail crossing at that location. City of Mission has approached the Hidalgo County RMA for an inter local agreement to help secure the right of way in between our toll road project to connect the west and get out to the north.

There is one more project, I-69 Connector, that will connect 69C to 69E and goes through part of the North Floodway. This would allow us to connect two interstates that currently are only connected by Interstate 2 which has limited capacity.

The overweight network within the Hidalgo county which the state legislators and TxDot bestowed to Hidalgo county RMA to administer. The state collects 85% of the fees collected and the RMA keeps 15% for the overhead and for maintaining the system. As a local provider of the overweight network, TxDot uses their collection of ON system. ON system being your FM roads, state highways, and you name it except for the Interstate as that’s federal and federal doesn’t want to deal with overweight. Dealing with overweight is a local and state decision. Right now, there is a lot of usage of Military Highway with spokes coming out on Jackson Rd, 10th Street, FM 396, and others. When a new ON system node gets put on the legislature, it gets approved by the Transportation Commission. The idea is once the projects are online, they will take some of the spokes off as they were projects of 30 or 40 years ago and aren’t built for overweight standards. Our projects are designed for overweight standards, therefore sustainable and cost a lot less to maintain and rehabilitate. We are trying to create a long-term solution to get the overweight trucks to using our network to get to their destination and remove the burden from local roads. With the current setup since 2014 the system has collected about 20 million. TxDot got about 17 million and the Hidalgo County RMA got about 2.5 million. We had a glut of funding but now we are back to the state projection shortfalls again so we will get a slowdown in transportation. We want to keep all tools at the ready so that when we get a project that is ready and viable, we want to push the project forward to create a more sustainable network.

**Question:**
How does this interact with the border wall?

**Answer:**
Interaction there is none, but we do traverse the floodway and essentially, they are designing around our projects.

**Question:**
This is related to drainage, how do we the communities get you information that if there is a crossing they get upgraded for future needs, or is that part of the planning you undertake?

**Answer:**
If there is an environmental active process taking place in a community those concerns can be brought up through a citizen, through a city or county. We have a memorandum of understanding with Hidalgo County Drainage District number 1. They are our outfall provider, so the RMA stays out of the drainage and this way if county Commissioners were already considering to upsize this is the time to work together.
Presentation Two: Illegal Dumping on the Levees
Senior Deputy Sandy Alonzo has 24 combined years of law enforcement and corrections experience. She got her Civil Process Proficiency certification and is a Master’s Peace Officer. Senior Deputy Leobardo Ortiz has a total of 12 years of law enforcement experience and is also a Master Officer and is now in the Environmental Crime Unit. They are with Precinct #2 which takes call East of Shary Road all the way to Border and then from the north to Owassa Road and south to the border. Illegal dumping has become an increasingly large problem in the United States. People tend to do it in the middle of the night, and we ask that you report any sightings and give us as much pertinent information as possible. The most common excuses given is we paid someone to do it, or we can’t afford the proper disposal. Unless you give the information of someone you paid you will be held accountable. Violations start from a Class C all the way to a Felony. They go through the content looking for anything that has a name address, phone number or anything that will help in the investigation to find the perpetrator and bring them to justice. At the time of shifting through the trash they will decide depending on the amount of trash, type of trash, where it was dumped such as in a body of water or along the levee again from a class c to a felony.

A person commits an offense if the person disposes or allows or permits the disposal of litter or other solid waste at a place that is not an approved solid waste site, including a place on or within 300 feet of a public highway, on a right-of-way, on other public or private property, or into inland or coastal water of the state. The process starts with dispatch taking the information about the dumping, then it is assigned to a deputy, and then the deputy starts working the case. Photos of a recent dumping in Jackson Rd by the levee was shown which included a large number of mail correspondence. Photos of another case where a renter accumulated a lot of tires and the culprit ended up fleeing to Mexico to avoid dumping charges and now the owner is responsible of cleaning up. The next slide had a brief video of Deputy Ortiz being asked what they do with trash that is dumped. Deputy Ortiz informed them that they go through it looking for addresses so they can find and go visit the resident. As far as the trash itself a work order ticket is submitted with county to get it cleaned up.

Punishment starts at a Class C misdemeanor if the waste weighs five pounds or has a volume of five gallons or less. It’s a Class B if it weighs more than five pounds but weighs less than 500 or more than 5 gallons but less than 100 cubic feet about 748 gallons.

Question:
When there is bad dumping what happens?
Answer:
Flood, fire, rodent and other problems can occur.

Question:
Is there any way to advertise to the public that there is consequences to illegal dumping?
Answer:
Deputy Alonzo replied: The local news has covered it and reemphasizing it over and over. We also have signs all over the place and we are working on getting top of the line cameras.

Question:
Let’s say I own a track of land that I don’t visit maybe only once a year and someone is dumping there, am I responsible?
Answer:
Yes, you are responsible to secure your land, or have cameras and to clean up the trash.

Question:
Where does the money come from to go out and clean up the dump sites?
Answer:
At the end of the day we all are paying for it.

Presentation Three: Lower Rio Grande Flood Control Project Operations and Maintenance Update
Frank Martinez gave an explanation that our main job is for flooding of the Rio Grande. There are about 275 miles of levee, 90 miles of which run parallel to the Rio Grande all the way close to Brownsville. The interior floodway system consists of the Main Floodway which splits to the North Floodway and the Arroyo Colorado. Typically, in the beginning of our fiscal year we get funding to get material and resurface some of our levees. We focus on the areas that need the most attention. The process involves laying caliche, filling potholes, repairing levee slopes and ramps which are due to erosion. We are also working on a MOA with CBP as they are the ones that mainly us our levees. In the past they have provided flexplace material or caliche and we resurface approx. 10 miles of river levee surface. What we do year-round is usually is channel and drain desilting, this allows cities and counties to drain into our floodway. We will remove all vegetation in the channel and once the desilt dries we spread it back in the field. We also do some heavy brush clearing throughout the floodways. Right now, our guys are clearing in the north floodway near the 506 and US77. We also clear some river playas which if there was river flooding that would allow us to convey and transit the waters through the river floodway. We try to maintain these areas and of course there is coordination with landowners and Fish and Wildlife to get these areas clear. As for levee and floodway mowing, we mow 12,000 acres a year. We have crews separated and working on different areas. Currently we have a crew in the Arroyo Colorado just south of La Feria and are working their way this way. They are mowing the floodplain grasses and levee slopes. We have another crew just south of Alamo-by-Alamo Road and they are working their way west. We have five tractor operators to mow the whole floodway which covers three counties. We have approx. 523 gated structures that are used to convey water from the land side to the flood side and that we have to inspect and are responsible for. There are others that belong to different entities, such has cities, counties, or private landowners which we do inspect as well but the cost for any repairs belongs to the owner entity. The structures are also painted to remain visible so that our guys don’t hit while mowing and avoid damaging them. As we were talking about illegal dumping, we do have traffic gates that we even began repairing/replacing about 3 or 4 years ago. However, they have not deterred people from going around, using the slopes as ramps and accessing our levees. We do have an MOA with the county Sheriff’s to stop any ATVs from using the levees, anyone dumping or accessing our levees. We also have landowners calling and telling us about ATV’s from accessing their land as well. We also have an MOA with CBP for the same, but most violations are done in the interior floodways. We also have signs informing that it is not a public road and inform that any trespasser will be prosecuted. We also do regular maintenance at our Mercedes Field office and on 10 floodgate crossings. The floodgates are designed to self-deploy if there is flood water that needs to be diverted into our interior floodways. The floodgate upkeep is usually done at night in coordination with TxDot.

Question:
At that rate you cycle through about once a year?
Answer:
We try to cycle through once a year. However, after 2010 a lot of farmers have planted less crops which has increased the area of mowing, we need to do. That has hindered us for completing the cycle in a year, but what has helped us out in the past is that our headquarters has approved overtime. Right now, funding is limited and we do not have approved overtime.

Question:
Which three counties?
Answer:
Hidalgo, Cameron and Willacy county. The last stretch of the North Floodway goes into Willacy.
Question: Do you leave the equipment out over night?

Answer: Yes, we leave the equipment out. Over the years we have established good relations with landowners, and they allow us to stage the equipment, in some areas we partner with Cities.

Future Agenda Items
Border construction.
Desalination.

Meeting adjourned at 4:51 p.m.

** Meeting notes are tentative and summarize in draft the contents and discussion of Citizen Forum meetings. While these notes are intended to provide a general overview of Citizen’s Forum Meetings, they may not necessarily be accurate or complete, and may not be representative of USIBWC policy or positions.