

CBP, GSA approve Donna, Pharr bridge infrastructure projects

By Steve Taylor July 4, 2016

PHARR, RGV – U.S. Customs and Border Protection has announced that two new proposals in South Texas have been selected for planning and development as part of the Donations Acceptance Program.

The Donations Acceptance Program, authorized by Section 559 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014, enables CBP and the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) to explore, foster and facilitate partnerships for port of entry infrastructure and technology improvements.

Under the program, CBP and GSA accept donations from the private sector and government entities for port of entry construction, alterations, operations and maintenance activities. The program allows for direct community investment in international ports of entry, strengthening partnerships among local communities and the federal government, and ultimately helping to improve international trade and commerce.

The two proposals in South Texas came from the City of Donna and the City of Pharr, to boost infrastructure at their respective international bridges. A third proposal, from Red Hook Terminals, was also approved for a project in Freeport, Texas.

“We are excited to welcome three new mutually beneficial partnerships under the Donations Acceptance Program; partnerships that CBP believes will lend themselves to a more secure, efficient, and reliable border transportation network,” said CBP Commissioner R. Gil Kerlikowske.

“Since launching last year, the Donations Acceptance Program has quickly become a viable mechanism and tool for investing in and expediting U.S. port of entry improvements.”

Norman Dong, public buildings service commissioner at GSA, agreed. “At GSA, we understand that all of our buildings are an important part of the communities where they are located. That is why we are so excited to be working together with these three municipalities through the Donations Acceptance Program. This innovative collaboration will allow us to support the kind of trade and travel that is vital to not just these locations, but our country as a whole.”

Dong said the City of Donna proposed constructing new inspection facilities and implementing more technologies to facilitate inbound empty commercial vehicle inspections at the Donna-Rio Bravo Port of Entry (POE). He said the City of Pharr proposed multiple improvements including constructing a new cold inspection facility, a new agricultural inspection training and development facility, and expanding secondary inspection dock space at the Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge.

Kerlikowske added that CBP is also pleased to announce that it is now accepting and evaluating proposals valued at \$3 million or less on a year-round basis under the Donations Acceptance Program. The Small-Scale Donation Proposal Process is a new offering and avenue for stakeholders interested in investing in and expediting small-scale, high impact border infrastructure, technology and other related improvements. Criteria and guidance for submitting a small-scale donation proposal can be found on cbp.gov/dap.

Kerlikowske said public-private partnerships are a key component of CBP’s Resource Optimization Strategy and allow CBP to provide new or expanded services and infrastructure at domestic ports of entry.

Donna-Rio Bravo International Bridge

Last year, the City of Donna won approval from CBP and GSA for an \$11 million project to build facilities at the Donna-Rio Bravo International Bridge to accommodate southbound empty trucks. Under the program, Donna has to find the funding and build the facilities, before transferring the building to CBP and GSA. The facilities are built to CBP and GSA specifications.

The new approval by CBP and GSA is for a \$17 million project to build facilities to accommodate northbound empty trucks.

“We are very excited to have been selected as one of two projects here in the Rio Grande Valley for commercial traffic northbound empties. Last year we were approved for southbound empties

commercial traffic. This program allows us to build the inspection facilities for the commercial traffic and donate those facilities for the federal government,” said Donna City Manager Ernesto Silva.

“The third piece would be to eventually have loaded commercial vehicles crossing at the Donna-Rio Bravo International Bridge. We are looking forward to submitting a 559 application under the Donations program. We expect to submit this in August and the selection will be next year. We are working towards a full-fledged port which would allow us to handle empty and loaded commercial traffic.”

At a recent city commission workshop retreat on South Padre Island, former Congressman Silvestre Reyes of El Paso said the City of Donna is building the prototype land port of entry for the 21st Century. Reyes is a lobbyist in Washington, D.C., for the City of Donna.

“For years we worked on legislation to ensure proper security at our land ports of entry and to design a prototype to help move traffic. We wanted to design a port with plenty of space, so you can put in the latest technology, fiber optics, those kinds of things. That is what is happening with Donna,” Reyes told the *Rio Grande Guardian*. “It is a 21st Century bridge. It will be a model for other ports of entry. We will be able to bring people here so they can see what a 21st Century bridge looks like.”

Asked about Reyes’ remarks that Donna is working on building the prototype land port of entry for the 21st Century, Donna City Manager Silva said: “We are planning to have dedicated lanes for certified cargo. By this we mean cargo that has been pre-certified that will cross our bridge automatically. We call it trade-in-motion. By using new technology, we can allow that cargo to free-flow from Mexico into the U.S. without having to stop for inspection, unless something is detected. If something is detected they would be sent to the secondary inspection.”

Silva added: “The idea is to have a very efficient port. The way we see it, we want to help the federal government by being as efficient as possible. To us, efficiency means more money for the port. The more efficient the port, the more attractive it is for trade to cross. The more trucks that cross, the more tolls the city will collect.”

Donna Mayor Irene Muñoz issued this statement:

“We are absolutely thrilled and grateful our 559 proposal for northbound empties has been selected. Many thanks and gratitude to CBP and GSA. Their acceptance of our application validates the

aspirations we have so earnestly worked for – to see that our bridge has all the infrastructure in place for commercial traffic north and south bound. The acceptance shows that CBP and GSA recognizes our project is viable, valuable, and worth investing in. This process and getting to this point has not come without a price. It has been costly not only financially to our taxpayers but in the amount of work our staff has had to put in. The planning, financial, and merging of integral parts is a real task and has taken much effort.

“However, the City of Donna is certainly seeing and experiencing the rewards of its sacrificial efforts. Even now economic growth is taking place creating jobs, sales taxes are up, and the interest of commercial development is tangible. We only foresee greater things happening to the Heart of the Valley and ultimately in our region.

“Our congressman, Filemon Vela and Rubén Hinojosa, deserve praise, as does our State Rep. Mando Martinez. They have given strong support. To the Mexican government agencies with whom we have good rapport, and with whom we work very closely, also deserve praise. We thank them for sharing the same vision and supporting the bridge – for help in getting us to this point.

“I would also like to thank our consultant/interim city manager Ernesto Silva, Josh Garcia, our bridge director, and our consultant and former congressman Silvestre Reyes for their dedication and determined efforts for the City of Donna. Their incredible work is to be praised and commended. It has been a long hard road for our community but what we are accomplishing in the toughest of times is a testament to the strong will of our community.”