

Rio Grande

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NIXON: USMCA SIGNING CEREMONY

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In 1993, when NAFTA was adopted, unemployment rates along the Texas-Mexico border were in double digits. The trade agreement increased business activity, created jobs and brought economic prosperity to South Texas.

Now, at the dawn of a new era with the implementation of USMCA, the economies of South Texas are prosperous, which is what those of us who worked to pass the new agreement were fighting to protect. Considering the fact that 95 percent of customers who purchase U.S. goods and services live outside the United States, trade is our lifeline.

For the last two years, we have traveled with mayors, county judges, chamber of commerce leaders and trade advocacy groups all across North America to build support for USMCA. We have gone to the USMCA negotiating sessions in Canada, Mexico and Washington, D.C. We have had high-level meetings, starting with then-Mexican President Peña Nieto and Secretary of the Economy Ildefonso Guajardo and his negotiating team, along with Mexican President Lopez Obrador and members of his cabinet, including Minister of Foreign Affairs Marcelo Ebrard and Sub-Secretary and lead USMCA negotiator Ambassador Jesus Seade. We have sat down numerous times with Mexican Ambassadors Geronimo Gutierrez and Martha Barcena. We have held, hosted and attended countless strategy meetings with our friends in the Mexican private sector from the Consejo Coordinador Empresarial (CCE) to the Asociacion de Empresarios Mexicanos (AEM).

Some of the naysayers said it would be a “cold day” before we could get this trade agreement passed. Well, they were right. As I sat in the third row on the South Lawn of the White House grounds last week in the 40-degree temperature to witness the signing of the USMCA, the only thing I felt was pride and a warm sense of accomplishment for the many communities that we serve. But I wasn’t alone.

Joining me was long-time colleague Gerry Schwebel, who was as persuasive advocating for NAFTA as he was for USMCA. So much so, that we were able to secure a “yes” vote from every single member of the Texas congressional delegation in the House and Senate.

Gov. Greg Abbott and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick were also in attendance, proud of what this means for the Texas economy and the prosperity of its residents. I was proud to stand on the White House lawn with Laredo Mayor Pete Saenz, who also worked across the private and public sector to get support for USMCA.

Unable to join us, were our other colleagues, including Senior Vice President Eddie Aldrete, who has been chairing the Texas-Mexico Trade Coalition for the last two years and is a member of the board of the Texas Association of Business, and our Eagle Pass bank president Hector Cerna, a leader on the board of the Border Trade Alliance. To all of my colleagues, I say thank you.

To all the trade associations: Border Trade Alliance, US Chamber of Commerce, Texas Association of Business, **Texas Business Leadership Council**, Texas Association of Manufacturers, Borderplex Alliance, the nation’s Farm Bureaus and many more—this would not have happened without their support. I say thank you.

Several years ago, at our downtown San Antonio bank, we hosted the San Antonio-Mexico Friendship Council “despedida” for Geronimo Gutierrez as he left San Antonio for Washington, D.C. to become Mexico’s Ambassador to the United States. We stood with him once again to see the fruits of our labor turn into a new trade agreement. We also worked closely with former U.S. Ambassadors to Mexico Tony Garza, Roberta Jacobson and many others. There are too many others to name, but they may all take comfort in knowing they were with us in spirit.

As bankers, we are economic developers by trade. Nothing flourishes in stagnation. Only in growth do we prosper and succeed. But the reality is there is no time for a victory lap. The next stage is the implementation of this agreement. It does us no good to see increased trade at our ports of entry if we do not have the customs inspectors and infrastructure to process that trade. “Regulation” doesn’t work unless it ensures the “regular” flow of goods and commerce. The longtime congestion that is costing billions must be solved to gain the full benefits from USMCA.

As the co-chair of the Trade Policy Working group of the U.S.-Mexico CEO Dialogue, I will be working with my Mexican counterpart, Moises Kalach, to ensure that we keep pushing our respective governments to put in place a system that can handle increased trade at our ports of entry. That means more staffing, facility enhancements, technology upgrades and a commitment to reducing bridge wait times.

What pleases me most about last week’s event is how so many people from different countries, different backgrounds and different parties came together to help make this happen. We worked with people all over the United States, with our friends in Canada and especially Mexico. I am lifted by the notion of our united common purpose and goals and our mutual understanding that we got the job done because we can only move forward when we move together.