

**CITY OF LAREDO  
SPECIAL CITY COUNCIL MEETING  
M2019-SC-04  
CITY COUNCIL  
CHAMBERS 1110  
HOUSTON STREET  
LAREDO, TEXAS 78040  
May 14, 2019  
5:30 P.M.**

**I. CALL TO ORDER**

Mayor Pete Saenz called the meeting to order.

**II. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

Mayor Pete Saenz led in the pledge of allegiance.

**III. MOMENT OF SILENCE**

Mayor Pete Saenz led in a moment of silence.

**IV. ROLL CALL**

In attendance:

Pete Saenz	Mayor
Rudy Gonzalez, Jr.	District I
Vidal Rodriguez	District II
Mercurio "Merc" Martinez, III	District III
Alberto Torres, Jr.	District IV
Norma "Nelly" Vielma	District V
Dr. Marte Martinez	District VI
George Altgelt	District VII
Roberto Balli	District VIII, Mayor Pro-Tempore
Jose A. Valdez, Jr.	City Secretary
Rosario Cabello	Interim Co-City Manager
Robert Eads	Interim Co-City Manager
Kristina L. Hale	City Attorney

**Citizen comments**

Victor Gomez displayed Section 6.05 (Capital Program) of the City of Laredo City Charter, noting that it is the City's constitution and must be followed. On May 6, 2019, City Council approved the water rate increase. Mr. Gomez noted that Section 6.05 (C) (Exception to Capital Program) states, "The cost of utility expansion must be made by those requesting expansion and the City Council will not obligate any citizen by adjusting the utility rate to defray cost." He asked if the City Council abides by the Charter or not; if not, he asked why the Charter exists. Management is tasked with enforcing the City Charter, and Mr. Gomez voiced his opinion that increasing the utility rate is immoral. Those who invest millions of dollars in the community do not have the right to dictate the actions that City Council must

take; it is the taxpayers that hold such right. He asked that Council introduce an amendment to the ordinance to exclude any new development as per the City Charter.

Mayor Saenz agreed that the language of the City Charter seems clear in its exception to the Capital Program. Kristina L. Hale, City Attorney, voiced her disagreement with Mr. Gomez's interpretation of this portion of the City Charter. She noted that the City is requesting the utility expansion in general, not any particular project; that is very different than the stipulations in the Charter. In 2008, the City increased the sewer rate for general expansion as well with the same language in the City Charter.

## **V. CITY MANAGER'S OFFICE: STAFF SOURCE CO-INTERIM CITY MANAGERS**

1. 2019-R-75 Resolution supporting HB 4306 relating to border security enhancement projects and the creation of a fund to pay for those projects and allocating the earnings on the balance of that fund and reimbursement of related expenditures including a study on water retention infrastructure near the border.

Robert Eads, Interim Co-City Manager, explained that this bill as introduced by Representative Kyle Biedermann and co-sponsored by Representative Poncho Nevarez. City officials met with them about a month ago, and the bill seeks to establish a fund to, at the Governor's discretion, be allocated for certain projects along the Texas border in some border communities. It is narrowly-scoped for Webb County, Maverick County, and Starr County. It is known as a border security enhancement fund which is used for planning, designing, construction, and maintaining along the state's international border water and transportation infrastructure, technology, commercial vehicle inspection infrastructure, a clearing of foreign plants, and providing for inspection facilities. This bill will for a project that the City has had on its books for about 12 years, a Rio Grande Vega study plan; the study plan was intended for a bulkhead for economic development purposes and creating a beautiful walkway along the edge of the Rio Grande. It could also be considered a safe physical barrier; from the US side, the 18-foot structure is not visible. On the Mexico side, the beautiful walkway is visible along with the elevated structure. It provides the necessary security features and technology as well as \$200 million of investment into Laredo's Downtown. Staff is supportive of this bill. Mr. Eads stated that a second project is included on this same bill: the expansion of FM 1472 (Mines Road) from Laredo to Eagle Pass. This bill would be enacted, the funds constituted and allocated through the rainy day fund; from that point, the City would go to the State and request from those funds improvement dollars to construct the bulkhead and Downtown improvement. There would be no private property takings for these improvements.

Mayor Saenz voiced his understanding that this bill was passed by the House committee and is now in the Senate; Senator Judith Zaffirini has asked for this resolution. He noted that the Senate hearing for this bill was scheduled for Wednesday, May 15, 2019, but it was postponed. He stated that Senator Zaffirini has made it clear that she intends to reschedule the hearing as soon as possible.

Mr. Eads reiterated staff's support of this resolution and bill as an economical tool at the City's disposal to address a twelve-year-old project; he clarified that the bulkhead might be considered a wall to some though staff disagrees and does not consider it as such. The City must be sure to protect its neighborhoods and Downtown investments and continue to invest dollars into the area.

Cm. Balli stated his support of this resolution and bill as it will be a unique enhancement to Laredo's Downtown and the whole riverside City. It will beautify the Downtown area and much of West Laredo, creating a better first impression of Laredo and improve the transportation from Laredo to Eagle Pass. Opening roads to West Texas as an alternative to I-35 may grant easier access to western states for better trade. Removing some traffic from I-35 could also improve transportation out of Laredo. He voiced his opinion that this resolution and bill passage would be an economic benefit to the community.

Mr. Eads reminded Council that there are no matching funds required of the City associated with this bill. The bill is wholly funded through State dollars, which are taxpayer dollars, and there are no additional costs to which the City must supply to participate.

Cm. Altgelt recalled meeting with the Chair of the Border Security Committee along with the Mayor of Nuevo Laredo; he was in favor of the bill because if there is an urban enhancement on the US that also consisted of a strategic barrier, then Nuevo Laredo would also appear less inviting from an organized crime standpoint. He reminded Council that this bill, which would make Laredo safer, would also make Nuevo Laredo safer. The project also helps the City rid the riverbank of invasive Carrizo Cane, which consumes a lot of water daily, adding to the Rio Grande's water quantity and by extension water quality. He estimated that this bill would reduce the instances of illegal immigration, stash houses, and volumes of drugs and dangerous substances coming into the United States.

Mayor Saenz noted that the authors of this bill are seeking local input. Cm. Mercurio Martinez echoed the sentiments that this proposed bulkhead is an impressive way to showcase Laredo and the entrance to the United States. The economic impact by linking Mines Road to Eagle Pass is also of significant benefit to Laredo.

Mayor Saenz voiced his understanding that if the bill passes, the Governor will initiate a study to best implement the funds and protect the Rio Grande.

Motion to adopt Resolution 2019-R-075.

Moved: Cm. Mercurio Martinez Second:

Dr. Marte Martinez

For: 5

Against: 0

Abstain: 0

## **VI. EXECUTIVE SESSION**

None

## **VII. GENERAL COUNCIL DISCUSSIONS AND PRESENTATIONS**

### **A. Request by Mayor Pro-Tempore Roberto Balli**

1. Discussion with possible action on the status of the 4 blocks, and any other matters incident thereto. (Co-Sponsored by Mayor Pete Saenz)

Ricardo Soliz, Abrazo Partners architect, reported that each intersection of this area currently has a crosswalk and stop lights, making them nearly pedestrian-friendly already. The scope of the Boulevard of the Americas project is to enhance existing crosswalks at all intersections for safety and accessibility, add medians, enhance plazas with hardscape and green spaces.

Monica Guajardo of Abrazo Partners reminded Council that in 2015, the firm held a design charrette coordinated through the American Institute of Architects (AIA). The citizens of Laredo, City staff, and private and public entities came together to provide input. Citizen opinion and vision was considered heavily to design the four blocks, and the resulting design contains several important elements. First, the reintroduction of the plaza system, Laredo's original basis for city planning, was incorporated into the design. The names assigned to each plaza were from the charrette discussions: Plaza Del Abrazo, Plaza Cuatro Caminos, Plaza De La Noria, and Plaza Azteca. The intention was to turn this area in a grand boulevard with medians, landscapes, and beautification of the existing sidewalks. Medians will help direct traffic and assist with traffic flow. The medians will also scale down the streets which pedestrians will cross and provide respite. Ms. Guajardo stated that the design includes xeriscaping with native grasses and plants along the plazas. The interior and functionality of the plazas have been left open for consideration, such as monuments or recreation space. She noted that an artist proposed a monument to Tomas Sanchez that Council may still consider.

Cm. Altgelt recalled Tomas Sanchez being a despot and cruel person. He asked if Council truly wants to honor such a person, especially given so many other notable and honorable Laredoans. Cm. Balli noted that the maquette of the statue is ready, and City staff has been trying to set up a meeting with the sculptor next week. He reported that the art is essentially ready. Council already committed to this art; Cm. Balli added that despot or not, Tomas Sanchez is the founder of the City of Laredo.

Ms. Guajardo stated in the first charrette meeting, a representative from every Laredo architectural firm was present. Cm. Altgelt reported that he attended two charrettes and recalled high attendance and numerous discussions.

Dr. Marte Martinez commented on the beauty of the design renderings and asked if the grass depicted required a lot of watering. Ms. Guajardo clarified that the grass to be used is xeriscaping-compliant and lowmaintenance. There

are a wide variety of native grasses with different hues and tonalities, using them in a pattern across the four blocks was a purposeful design. Dr. Martinez voiced his opinion that the grass in the renderings is manicured. Frank Rotnofsky of Abrazos Partners assured Council that the intention of the vegetation in the four blocks is to be very low-maintenance.

Mayor Saenz voiced his concern that the design reduces the number of traffic lanes at this location. Mr. Rotnofsky clarified that the number of lanes will not be reduced.

Ms. Guajardo reported that another important element to be incorporated is encouraging pedestrian activity in this area. She recommended raised paving at the intersection to bring the pedestrians to the same level as the plazas. This would also help to slow vehicular traffic and make the pedestrians in the area safer. Part of the speed mitigation plan is having the 12-foot lanes reduced to 11 feet each, which would provide the room for medians. Narrower lanes cause vehicles to drive more slowly.

Mayor Saenz asked if lighting will be provided with this project. Ms. Guajardo confirmed that it is part of the design and will be incorporated. She reported that the firm has had several meetings with TxDOT, who continue to view this portion of I-35 as a highway. Mr. Rotnofsky explained that this is because it is part of Texas right-of-way. The firm continues to have these discussions locally and federally to find common ground for this area.

Cm. Altgelt suggested adding an agenda item to the May 20, 2019, Council meeting regarding the local TxDOT office implementing the National Highway regulations regarding pedestrian and bicycle activity in an area such as the four blocks. Cm. Balli added that Abrazo Partners could give another presentation during that Council meeting.

Mr. Rotnofsky clarified that the firm is already working with TxDOT at the master plan level.

Ms. Guajardo noted that TxDOT's objective is to facilitate traffic from I-35 to Highway 83 and minimize pedestrian traffic as much as possible. Cm. 5 Altgelt noted that I-69 and Saunders both link up with Highway 83 and questioned why TxDOT would further tear up the urban fabric at the four blocks. Ms. Guajardo noted that TxDOT hopes to take from one of the plazas to create a dedicated turning lane for truck traffic, but she noted that doing so would create a bottleneck and would not be beneficial.

Dr. Martinez asked about regular vehicular traffic like buses with the raised sidewalks and paving as proposed. Mr. Rotnofsky stated that the firm considered tactical urbanism, an applied methodology to address those concerns.

Mr. Soliz reported that the Boulevard of the Americas will be implemented in three phases. Phase 1 will include the tactical urbanism pilot project, the grasslands project (including I-35 landscape of embankments to Scott Street), plaza enhancements and pedestrian paths, and the placement of Tomas Sanchez's sculpture. Phase 2 includes permanent medians, raised pavers

crosswalks, the enhancement of the Scott Street overpass, and bike lanes to create an east-west connection. The third and final phase includes future monuments.

Viviana Frank of Abrazo Partners explained that tactical urbanism strategies use paint to signal traffic flow and pedestrian guiding in order to keep urban areas with interacting vehicle and pedestrian traffic safe. She displayed several examples of paint applied artistically to provide an appealing means of safely alerting vehicles to pedestrians and vice versa in these shared spaces. Tactical urbanism projects help cities test, plan, and retest to continually learn about the public spaces in their area and make data-derived decisions. She explained that many communities keep tactical urbanism projects for longer than they estimated the pilot projects to last, either because of reinvesting money to modify the project or because the community members like it the way it is and choose to reinvest in it. Connecting the plazas with paint will allow people to easily walk between them. She clarified that the crosswalks between the plazas are at the corners of the street as usual, not in the middle of the plazas.

Dr. Martinez voiced his concerns that the architect's designed these plazas to be pedestrian-heavy in a high-traffic area, which is a safety concern. He noted that currently, if the plazas attract people, they are going to have to drive to the location, but there are no considerations made to parking for those people. Traffic is heavy in this area in all directions, and he stated that if Council is going to set up an area to invite people, then appropriate safety measures must be made and the new feature should not make the current congestion issue worse. He questioned whether the current design is the right solution for the City, even though he noted that he fully supported the beautification of the area. Mr. Rotnofsky agreed that the architectural firm are still looking for the answers to those questions.

Cm. Balli clarified that this area is not congested in the way that McPherson Road and Del Mar Boulevard are; this road invites speeding when there is light traffic. Mrs. Frank reminded Council that these types of projects are all over the place with traffic on both sides of the plazas and green spaces.

Rosario Cabello, Interim Co-City Manager, voiced her opinion that the project is beautiful but asked how the City would keep the painting areas clean. Mayor Saenz added that the tall dry prairie grasses in the renderings may collect debris or smoldering cigarette butts and start fires. Mrs. Frank noted that there are 2,000 species of grasses native to Texas; there is no need to get too concerned with the specific grass depicted in the rendering as the City and architects can pick the most appropriate species.

Cm. Altgelt stated his intention that increasing the number of people who have access to these plazas is the end goal. Regarding maintenance, he noted his vision of agaves and succulents that would be very low maintenance while still being visually appealing. He added that there is still a prominent issue with homeless populations in the area coming from the Bethany House.

Robert Eads, Interim Co-City Manager, informed Council that the buses have been rerouted to Bridge #2. Cm. Balli added that food trucks could be put along the plazas for those passengers and other visitors to enjoy.

Cm. Balli stated that this project needs City management to buy into, or else it will not work. Mayor Saenz agreed, noting that the City needs to do it right. Mr. Eads added that the plazas need to be all-inclusive for the different industries, citizens, and visitors to Laredo.

Mayor Saenz asked management and Cm. Balli what monies have been allocated for this project and what its current budget is. Cm. Balli stated his intention to put this item on the next Council agenda with another presentation to discuss the budget and funding source.

Motion to place this item on Monday's City Council meeting agenda to discuss the funding source.

Moved: Cm. Balli Second: Cm. Altgelt For: 5 Against: 0 Abstain: 0

Mr. Rotnofsky conceded that the four blocks section is a complicated area of Laredo; Times Square is also an area with a mixture of pedestrians and vehicular traffic, and New York City has touted the area as the crossroads of the world. New York had very similar issues as well in their planning and traffic rerouting. They actually eliminated five traffic lanes while still making having a successful tactical urbanism project. He reported that Laredo has adopted a local Vision 2020 program, but Texas also has a 2020 vision plan, which was used in the architectural firm's design of this plan.

Dr. Martinez asked why the firm would not simply raise the crosswalks rather than raising the crosswalks and painting them. Mrs. Frank reminded Council that this is the master plan phrase, which is equitable to large brushstrokes. Staff still must look at the budget and see if painting is even feasible given the resources available. Mr. Rotnofsky estimated the tactical urbanism pilot project to be about \$400,000 based on the firm's preliminary research. That includes the paint, barriers, planting, and other elements of the project. Jersey barriers would also be used to separate traffic traveling to Downtown versus traveling to Mexico.

Mrs. Frank noted that the City would have to add the program to the Land Development Code.

## **VIII. ADJOURNMENT**

Motion to adjourn.

Moved: Cm. Altgelt

Second: Dr. Marte Martinez

For: 5

Against: 0

Abstain: 0