



# Economy and Environment in the Lower Rio Grande Valley

## The Results of Four Leaders' Forums in Brownsville, Texas April 29 & 30, 1999

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as part of  
**The Laguna Madre Project, a Binational Initiative**  
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## **What is The Texas Center for Policy Studies?**

Based in Austin, TCPS is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization offering research and technical assistance to citizens groups in the binational border region, Rio Grande Valley and throughout Texas. Our interest in the Rio Grande Valley is to help communities find ways to develop economically while also enhancing protection of natural resources; clean air, clean water, green space and wildlife habitat. Our principal focus is on protection of the Laguna Madre - both in Texas and Tamaulipas.

## **What are the Leaders' Forums?**

The Community Leaders' Forums were held in Brownsville Texas, on April 29 and 30, 1999. The purpose of the forums was to gather information about leaders' views on the local economy and the environment in Cameron and Willacy Counties with a special emphasis on the Laguna Madre Region.

## **What is the Laguna Madre Project?**

The Laguna Madre Project is a partnership between Texas Center for Policy Studies, the new northeastern office of the respected Mexican conservation organization - Pronatura Noreste, and local communities. The Laguna Madre is unique in all the world. The Laguna and all associated ecosystems like the Arroyo Colorado, Rio Grande and South Padre Island are important natural elements to understand so that as the region develops, these natural systems are protected. This project is a long-term, binational effort to promote and work toward ecological and economic stability in the region, in partnership with local organizations and citizens.

## **How is the Community involved in this process?**

While the Laguna Madre Project is coordinated in Texas by TCPS, and in Tamaulipas by Pronatura Noreste, a non-profit conservation organization based in Monterrey, a local binational advisory committee of community members from the Lower Rio Grande Valley and Matamoros guides this project. The information we gather from our research and from public surveys such as this will be shared with all interested planners, city and county elected officials, business and conservation organization leaders and the public to aid in decision-making.

## **Results In Brief:**

***1) Leaders feel alternately hopeful and anxious about the future. They want to be able to keep up with growth but currently there are not enough resources to do so. They are overwhelmed with the need for jobs, infrastructure and a better educational system.***

***2) There is no clear vision about where to go and how to get there, but a definite desire for one.***

***3) Leaders feel that more cooperation among all groups is necessary in order to progress economically and to promote conservation.***

## *Survey Methodology*

- ⇒ An initial telephone survey of 400 registered voters in Cameron and Willacy counties was conducted early in 1999, (some of those results included in this report) followed by;
- ⇒ Four small group discussion sessions involving 33 community leaders (30% women, 70% men)\*.

\*A complete list of participants and their affiliations is included in Appendix A.

## *Principal Findings*

*#1: Growth is both a positive and a negative - most want growth but not at the current pace*

- “Cities and counties long term will have to do water supply planning together.”
- “We need to be proactive rather than reactive or growth may lead to crisis - will Brownsville have to tear down buildings downtown to widen the streets for example?”
- “On South Padre Island people want growth and tourism, it just depends on what kind.”
- “An influx in capital from commercial development might lead to more prosperity in the long term, but maybe disparity in the short term”
- “Probably only a crisis will bring (communities in the Valley) together to pool resources and work on long-term planning.”
- “From a regional planning perspective growth is exciting but scary - we’re less reliant on the peso now, the last devaluation had practically no effect on growth, but we need to get a handle on infrastructure now or we’ll have serious health and safety issues in next five to ten years - growth needs to slow down til we catch up.”
- “A think tank in Mexico City did a study that showed mass migration of people from Veracruz to Matamoros; the model for development seems to be building big plants and attracting even more people. It doesn’t seem like we should be doing this type of development here.”
- Current level of growth is “frightening”, “uncontrolled”, “overwhelming”, “complete chaos”.

## *Analysis*

Those who in some way might profit from growth were generally more positive about it, while those who had to deal with the effects of that growth were less so, or at least more inclined to temper their enthusiasm. However, with only one or two exceptions, all participants eventually expressed some reservations regarding the level of growth that is currently being experienced in the region, and about half were very concerned.

About 25% cited recent growth indicators, such as new jobs being created, new industries encouraged to relocate in the valley, roads and bridges under construction, growing educational opportunities, and upscale malls and shopping centers being built as positive economic signs. Empowerment zones were viewed as having had a very positive impact on the community - one participant claimed that in the Cameron County area, empowerment zones had created 115 new businesses and an additional 9 million in local funding.

They were also very enthusiastic about new training programs in hospitality services and other types of programs designed to up the average wage scale. It was felt that these programs were evolving in response to growth - and that they might not have happened otherwise.

Those more concerned about growth said it needed to be managed better, and if the programs and infrastructure could keep pace, and the proper business environment established, communities were poised for a better future. Several spoke about the need to balance growth with environmental protection. Others noted that the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) had posed some “interesting challenges” in terms of meeting infrastructure needs for the incredible amount of truck traffic now crossing the border.

Representatives from the agricultural community expressed a certain amount of resignation about growth. Many acres of farmland are taken out of production as urbanization expands across the landscape, and the days of farming being passed down generationally are over. The average farmer now has to work very hard to make a gross income of only \$100 an acre.

Many participants believe that more problems loom for the region. Several participants noted that two of the population segments experiencing the highest growth - children and seniors - are also the two requiring the most services - health care, education, etc. Some examples of the negative aspects of growth were: rural areas experiencing growth where no services such as water and septic in place, despite the new colonia regulations (people find housing where they can); trash disposal a major problem; lack of code enforcement personnel in cities and counties (numbers of staff people not going up in response to growth and funds not being apportioned to hire more); and impacts on quality of life from loss of even more brushlands, water, and open space. Impacts on local wildlife and

refuges were also felt as uncontained livestock, vandalism, and poaching of plants and wildlife becomes more common.

The causes of growth were attributed to a variety of things; high fertility rates in both native-born and immigrant populations, NAFTA, influx of migrants from both directions - north and south (Central Americans fleeing Hurricane Mitch, for example); and economic development policies which continue to encourage growth from industrial expansion.

Several participants in different sessions discussed the importance of the census count to the valley, which they say is notoriously and continuously undercounted by at least 5%, and leads to the region receiving less than its fair share of federal and state funding as a result. This situation results from illegal immigrants comprising some of the population, haphazard housing situations and people living in areas that are simply not noted on a map.

Many noted that decision-makers are not aware of how bad the situation is - that they have to be made to listen and understand just how much is needed in funding and services to actually address the tremendous growth pressure now on the region.

Some don't believe that any amount of planning will really help control growth, but that people need to be willing to invest more money in enhancing local assets rather than attracting new industries.

***#2: Living wage jobs, education and appropriate training are the primary concerns relative to sustaining a healthy economy***

- “Industries can pool funds and do on-site plant trainings - some of this is happening already.”
- “We’re focusing on education because there’s a cycle of underachievement locked in the system, we have to demand better.”
- “What happens after NAFTA when industrial expansion fades and there is growing competition among industries, we need locally-produced goods that have value on the market.”

**Analysis**

Living wage jobs and availability of appropriate training opportunities are tied closely to growth. The majority of the participants felt that education and training were key areas in need of development; many felt they were the most important priorities for action. In fact, several mentioned that in spite of what chronic double-digit unemployment rates might mean, jobs do exist, but applicants are not adequately trained or educated to take advantage of them. One participant noted that out of 270 applicants for a recent job opening at Southwestern Bell, only three passed the basic entrance exam. Another described a situation where among many hundreds of residents submitting job applications for local positions, very few had the necessary language or skill sets to meet even the minimum requirements.

Others noted that the training needs to be tailored to existing workforce needs, and that companies should provide some commitment to hire the newly trained so they are not being given a skill for a job that doesn’t exist. Most of the participants expressed some misgiving about what they viewed as a heavy reliance on manufacturing-related industries as a key component of the economic base. A few pointed out that the closing of even one plant - such as the Levi’s manufacturing plant, could put hundreds or even thousands of people out of a job overnight. One participant noted that industries had been heading progressively south for a long time and there was no reason to believe they would not continue, leaving open the question of what might be left for the valley once these types of industries were gone. A few expressed concern that the intelligence trades - microchip industries, for example, would not locate here unless quality of life issues were addressed and there were qualified workers available.



There were a few positive initiatives mentioned - a customer service training program at the Continuing Education Department at UT Brownsville, and a local capacity-building project begun in 1994 called VIDA and coordinated by Valley Interfaith, to name two.

Those integrally involved in such training programs mention a need for living wage jobs. Even when jobs are available some people will prefer to stay on government assistance programs, like welfare and food stamps, rather than opt for a low-paying job. According to one or two participants this is why it's difficult to find "decent help" even in very poor areas.

Education tended to dominate some of the discussion - clearly, participants felt strongly about this subject. Some faulted the school systems for not turning out work-ready graduates, others said parents and the students themselves need to be held more accountable.

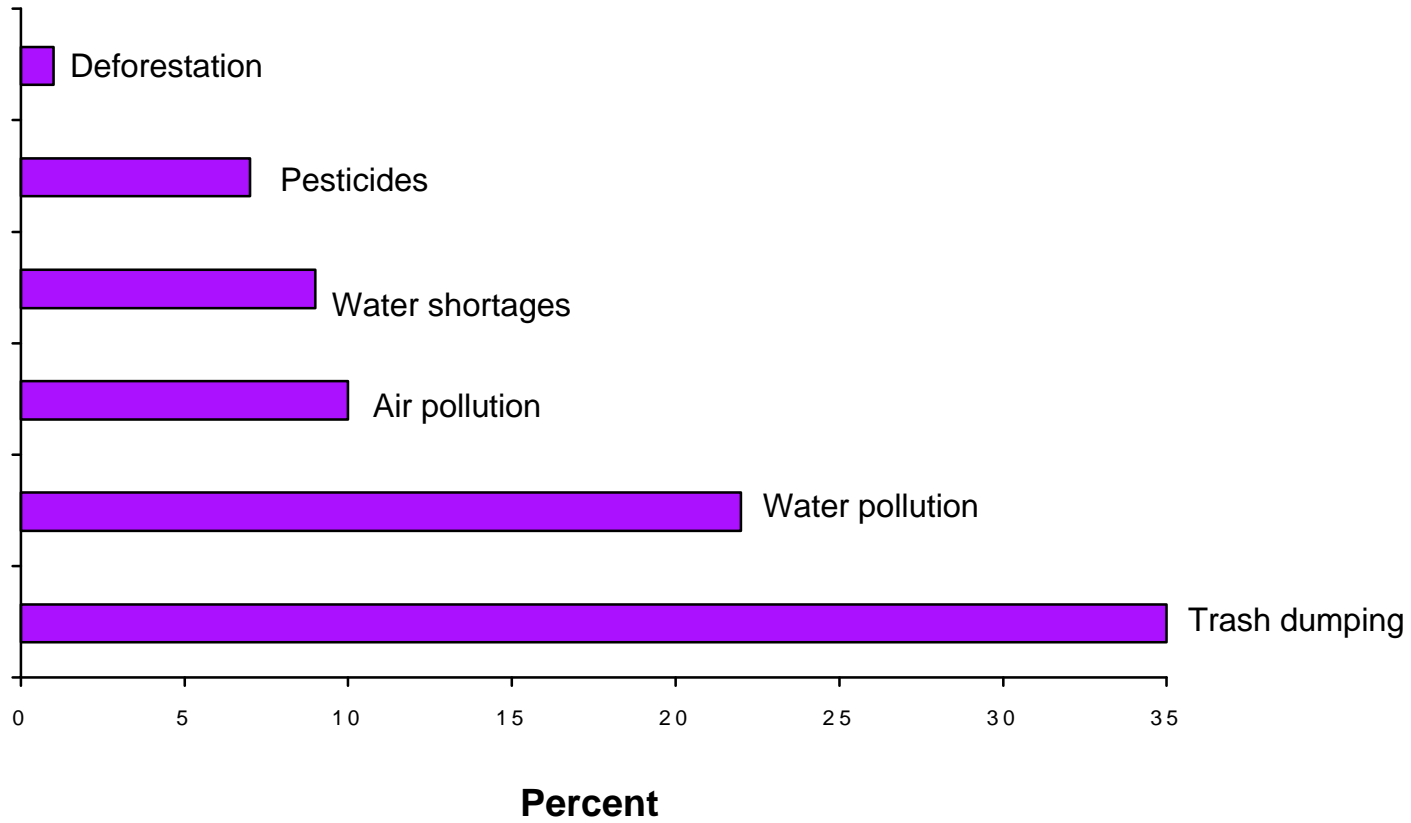
There were a few comments about the fact that the Port Isabel school district, under the current legislative requirements, was having to contribute some of its educational tax base to the city of Harlingen. This obviously did not sit well with the Port Isabel residents.

The human resource potential and number of bilingual residents were both listed as positive assets for the region. However, others felt that the "bilingualness" of the population was overrated - that neither English nor Spanish is spoken very well, rather a mixture of the two.

Some complained about the education of Mexican students that was creating a strain on the system. They claimed that many students had to go through remedial programs to be brought up to speed, that there should be a system set up whereby the students from Mexico pay up front upon registration at school to supplement existing educational funds. Others said that teachers were not paid enough - even the UT professors were not making a comparable salary, and this was reflected sometimes in the quality of education students were receiving. A few representatives from the educational community recognized these problems, but pointed to a collective societal low expectation as a contributing factor.

A few participants who had actively sought to fill job openings with local residents complained about a lack of people educated in specific areas. Some of the jobs requiring a college education or specialized skill area, like biologist or professional manager, are again and again filled with people from outside the region. Others said the "brain drain" would continue until there were jobs available for these graduates also - the emphasis on trade-related training in some cases overshadows the lack of knowledge-industry or professional jobs necessary to keep college graduates in town.

***Telephone survey: What are the biggest environmental problems in your area?***



### ***#3: Water, infrastructure and trash are the top concerns listed relative to environmental and public health***

- “People don’t know what the laws are - the only way the valley will survive is by working together toward a common good - pool resources and hire more code enforcement people for example.”
- “Maybe water will eventually limit growth.”
- “The water discussions happening now are a reaction to a crisis - maybe what we need to be is more proactive.”
- “If people can’t find affordable housing in town they go to the rural areas and then we have the septic tanks issue - the county has to enforce that but there aren’t enough people.”
- “There’s a real problem with trash bags on the beach - if we could just start by cleaning the place up, there’s dumping everywhere.”
- “We’re not out of water - we’re out of cheap water.”

#### **Analysis**

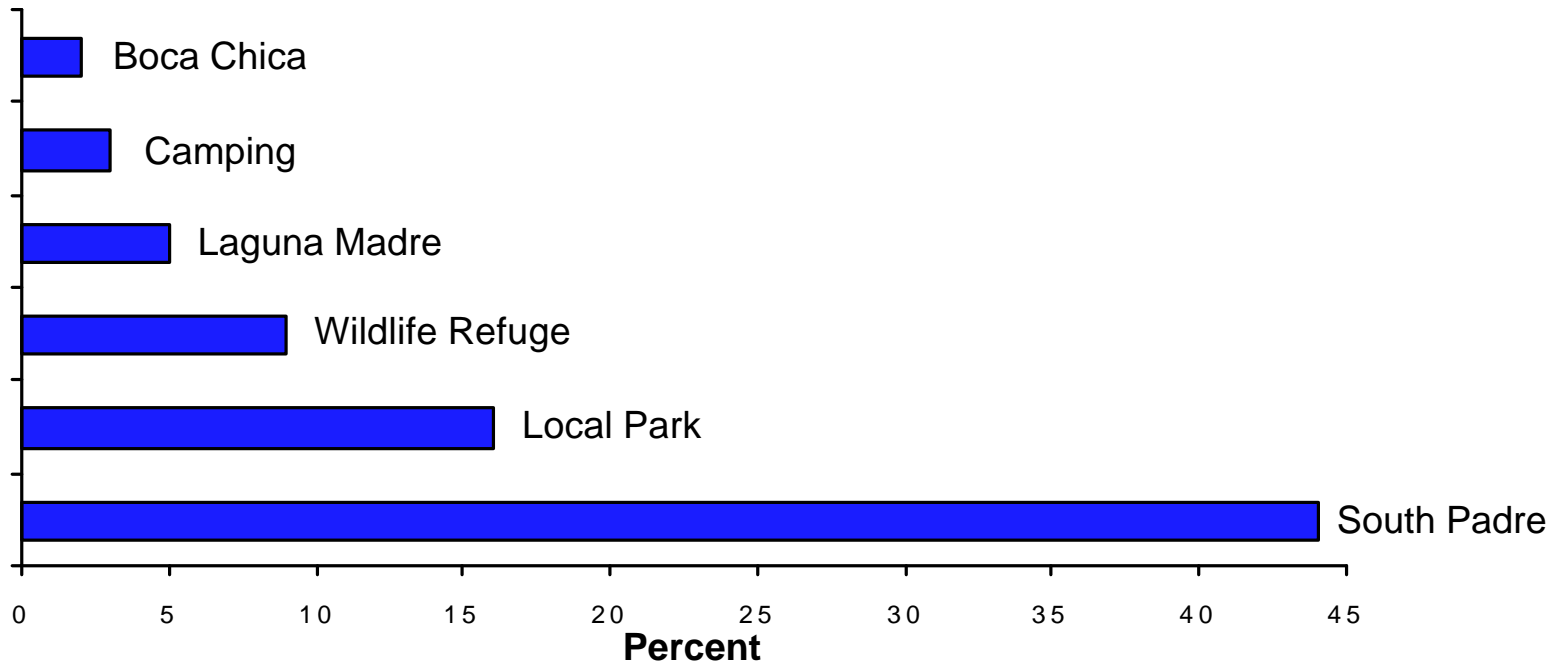
Participants tended to answer questions about the environment with concerns about environmental problems affecting humans and of human origin, specifically those related to growth. Trash dumping was viewed as a major problem. Organizers of the annual beach clean-ups told stories of finding hundreds of the plastic bags handed out to day users to aid in daily beach clean-ups buried on the beach full of trash. Lack of code enforcement, as well as the lack of standardized regulations across jurisdictional boundaries were also concerns. Some felt that the lack of standardized regional ordinances would eventually result in an unmanageable traffic situation.

There were multiple concerns about water - both access to clean water and water availability. However, the lack of water was of greater overall concern. Participants were split down the middle about whether or not cities would “run out” of water. The agricultural representatives felt that with changes in water management, irrigation districts would have to reform, freeing up water for city growth, and that while agriculture would be sacrificed, cities would probably not run out of water. A few participants discussed the river’s habitat and the importance of maintaining brush along the river and enough flows to keep it healthy.

The idea of desalinization was offered as a way to augment water supplies, but one participant noted that it would cost a prohibitive \$4.00 per 1000 gallons. Some complained that given the shortage of water, the proposed South Padre Island water park was a “ridiculous idea”.

A few participants mentioned dust problems. Two major sources of dust which cut down on quality of life were dust from wide swaths of fallow farm fields and from the dredge spoil islands piled up in the Laguna Madre as a result of maintaining the depth of the Intercoastal Waterway.

***Telephone Survey: Where do you and your family go to enjoy nature or the outdoors?***



#### ***#4: There is a need for more awareness about the Laguna Madre ecosystem***

- “We’re masters of our own destiny but we cannot damage what sustains us indiscriminately or we damage ourselves.”
- “People need to recognize the value of conservation and preservation, there are more benefits to preservation than to destruction.”
- “People are making the connection, for example when Asplundh knocked down that palm tree in Brownsville and there was a big uproar - people are slowly developing an awareness.”
- “If we ruin the Laguna Madre, we’re really in trouble.”
- “As far as the Arroyo Colorado situation, we did this to ourselves, nobody can solve our problems but us.”

#### **Analysis**

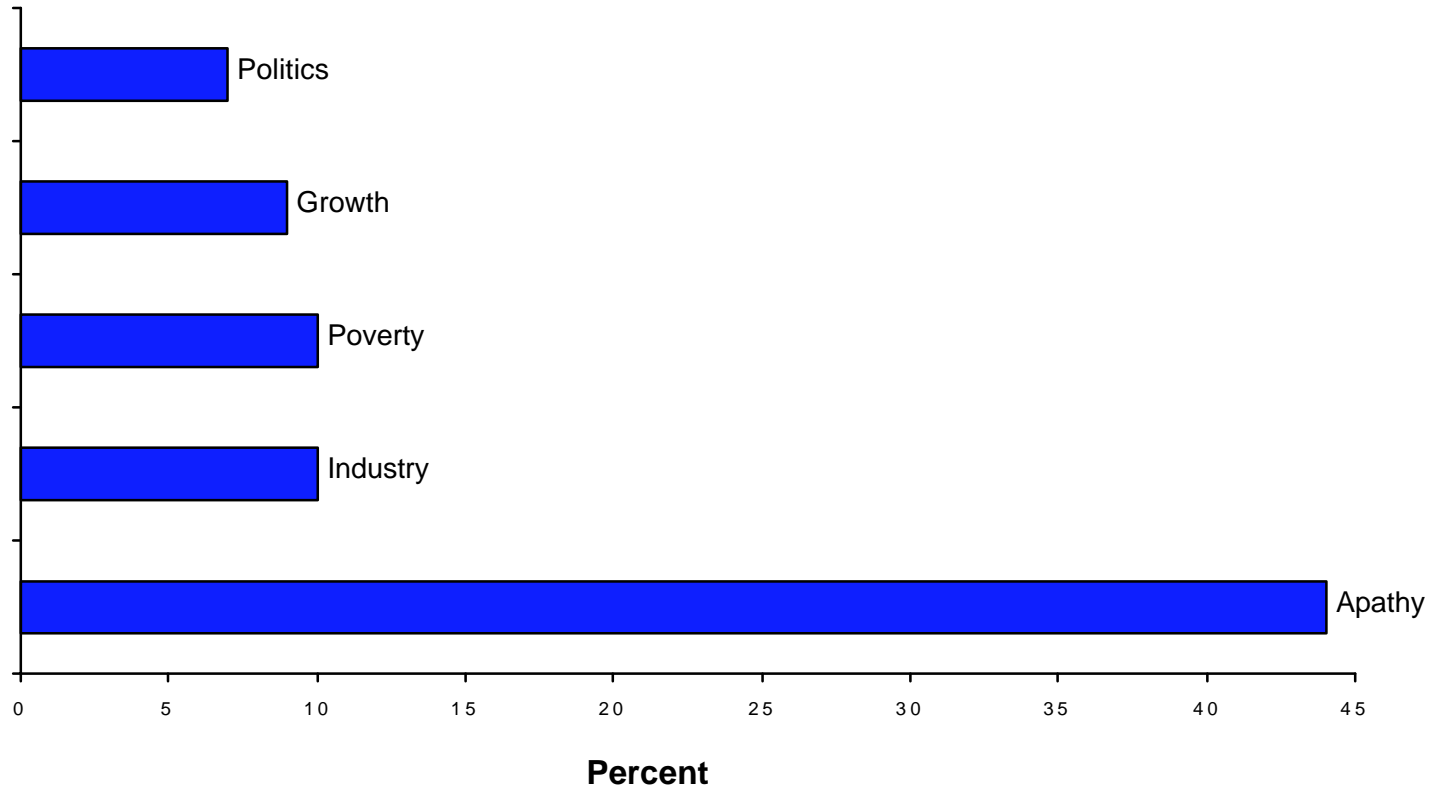
About 85% of the Forum participants recognized that ecosystems are important for many reasons. However, probably only 10% could articulate what ecosystems contribute to our lives - primarily the participants with biology backgrounds and those whose livelihoods depend upon the resources of the bay system. They spoke about the “delicate balance” and “fragility” of the Laguna Madre, the vast natural resources it provides and their concern for maintaining its biological health. Some mentioned that the bay brings many millions of dollars in economic benefit to the region yearly and that its current health needed to be watched closely, that people should not “let their guard down” and become complacent about it. Another participant spoke about the Laguna Madre’s “fantastic natural resources” and the fact that it supports tourism, fisheries and commerce and provides immeasurable quality of life for local communities. Also mentioned were the endangered species connected with the Laguna Madre: that 10 to 15% of the entire world population of piping plovers, a small shorebird, spend their winters on South Padre and the Laguna Madre, and the peregrine falcon, brown pelican, as well as thousands of marine aquatic organisms, birds and plants, are dependent upon the bay system.

Other comments mentioned the decline in some types of seagrasses over the past few years, problems with red tide, construction practices that could damage shore and dune vegetation, and a variety of concerns related to growth pressure and continued exploitation of the resource. Several of the participants mentioned and were aware of the controversial lawsuit brought upon the Army Corps of Engineers by several conservation organizations over disposal of dredge material in the Laguna Madre.

Some participants remarked that people from outside the county who utilize the Laguna Madre should be educated about its resources, and be more aware of the value it has to

Cameron County. There was general consensus that local school children do not have many opportunities to learn about the bay system ecology though many families do recreate and fish in its waters. It was mentioned that the consumption of the resource through some type of active use - fishing, swimming etc was more typical of what local awareness was based on, and that people would become very protective of their right to use the resource without understanding much about its ecological systems.

***Telephone survey: Which do you believe to be the primary cause of environmental problems in your area?***





***#5: There is concern about how economic development practices might be affecting people and natural resources***

- “We want the industry so badly that we give up the whole ship, but they’d come down anyway for the labor force.”
- “We’ve got to figure out how to enjoy this economic boom without screwing up the environment and natural resource base...the government won’t bail us out, we need to find the solutions on our own, but too often people won’t do the right thing, it all comes down to money.”
- “We’ve recruited our problem - sometimes environment has to take a back seat
- But maybe because environment has taken a back seat it’s the reason why we have these problems, we should include these factors in decision-making.”
- “We need to stop propping up development and stop allowing the EDC’s to have control over the money - let the free market handle it.”

**Analysis**

Over half of Forum participants expressed some dismay at the activities displayed by local economic development interests. There was a sense that the money being spent to attract industries to the area was not being spent wisely. Others felt that this characterization was unfair and that they were going through critical evaluations with regard to which industries were sought and what type of incentives were offered. One person noted that the public needed to be educated more on what type of industries were “smokestack” industries and which were not - that industries in general have earned a reputation as being environmentally “unsafe” when not all industries pollute.

When asked what types of industries or economic development they would prefer, participants mentioned “clean manufacturing”, tourism expansion such as boating trips on the Arroyo Colorado, communication service centers, etc. However, there were few concrete suggestions for types of businesses - mostly a general sense that a broader scope of possibilities existed if enough creative minds could get together. The point was made that Austin, with one of the biggest growth areas in the state, still managed to keep its quality of life fairly high and maintain diversity in its economy - thus contributing to the

reason people are moving to the capital city. Others pointed out that the growth visited upon Austin had been just as unexpected, with some problems resulting - such as the lack of adequate sewage treatment capacity - that had also had to be addressed quickly.

***#6: Environmental and other interest groups in the Valley, as well as communities in the Valley, need to work together more***

- “The days of coming together are not going to happen - people will say one thing and do another.”
- “We need to find issues people can work on together and build strategies around the need for planning. We did this with the drought and came up with the regional water plan.”
- “We need state involvement because we need state resources, plus they have so much paper and reports, if we work with them we can be more effective.”
- “We need a regional group accessing dollars for regional solutions.”
- “We need to get control of the situation”
- “What controls on maquila industry do we have?”
- “There’s a need for local control and input.”
- “If you fly in at night and look down at how the valley spreads out - it’s like one big city, not separated towns, it’s incredible we aren’t working together like one city.”

**Analysis**

Participants in one group exhibited quite a bit of rancor toward government regulations in general and environmental regulations specifically. The term “environmentalist” seems to evoke negative reactions on the one hand, and to be linked to the undesirable environmental regulations. On the other hand, most participants, as pointed out previously, recognize the value of protecting the natural resources (for future human consumption, at least), but did not seem to link the protection of the resource with the role of environmentalists in advocating that protection.

On the other hand, a few participants recognized the role of the federal government in helping to negotiate binational solutions along the border. They articulated the difficulty of trying to understand Mexican law and the complications this reality presents for regional binational cooperation, listing more, rather than less, federal government involvement as having positive benefit in this regard.

The more commonly held view was that groups needed to sit down at the table together to “hash out” these ideological differences and come to some workable agreements that would satisfy everyone. About half the participants felt that government regulations and extremist views interfered with this process. Several participants in different forum groups suggested bringing state and local representatives to a venue where they “would have to listen” to local concerns about the most important environmental and economic issues.

Many, if not most, participants expressed frustration with the lack of local cooperation on planning, combating serious issues and getting together to request more funding from state and federal governments. Some said the history of competition for funds has left the region splintered and divided, and even when it appears to be progressing toward some harmony the process can get derailed at any time. This group was influenced by the recent decision to locate the World Birding Center in Mission on the individual action of Representative Kino Flores, and incensed by the good faith that this action had seemed to destroy.

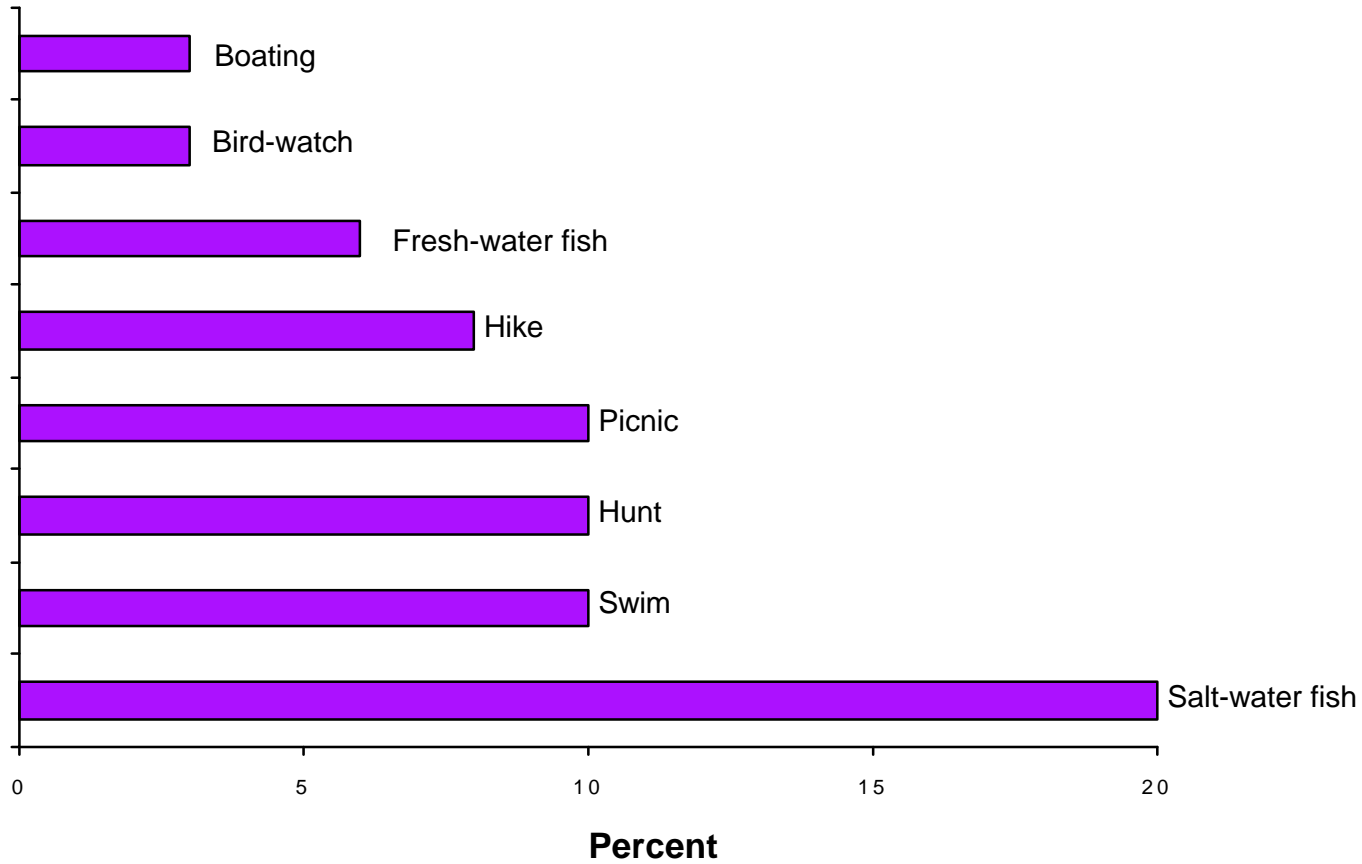
One participant was not hopeful at all about communities in the Valley “coming together”, because there are over 30 cities and 37 water districts in the region. Still others mentioned the conflicts brewing between urban and rural zones around water and infrastructure issues.

A separate comment was made in one group that while some of the planning taking place is piecemeal, not all of the funding requested for projects comes through. As a result, there is the appearance of fragmentation, but there is only the ability to address a certain number of issues at any one time. This participant noted that there are some periphery advantages to thinking of the area as a region regarding certain issues, but maybe impossible to think in terms of a region on all issues. For example, funding for the LRGV Development Council to do infrastructure planning hasn’t increased in the past five years, so even if they know the issues they don’t have the finances or personnel to plan for all of them.

A couple of examples were given that illustrated successful partnerships: the recent regional water plan coordinated by the Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council; the study being conducted to define water quality needs in the Arroyo Colorado with the cooperation of landowners, businesses, the environmental community and irrigators; and various joint tourism initiatives among valley tourist bureaus.

Participants were adamant that these types of partnerships, while time-consuming, were worthwhile, but that “sitting on current guidelines” would not get anything done. Cooperation is forced - cities/irrigation districts for ex - got 3.5 million address the situation and woke up cities to reality of need for cooperation

***Telephone Survey: What do you usually do for outdoor recreation?***



## **#7: *Quality of life could be improved***

- “We need to help ecotourism take hold, support the refuge expansion, keep the brushlands.”
- “Look at 10th Street in McAllen - the people there were upset about taking the trees out and they don’t want so many billboards and all that. I mean, it seems like people’s mindsets are changing but we can’t get past the bureaucracy, there’s a feeling of helplessness and desperate running to catch up, and how are these things happening without us being involved or in control?”

### **Analysis**

Participants were split about evenly on whether or not they felt the local quality of life was good. The general assets listed were tropical climate, proximity to the coast, ecological diversity, cultural heritage and historical heritage. Most participants had both positive and negative comments about the local quality of life, but some had only negative comments. Without exception, each felt that attitudes were changing, that people were beginning to care about green space and traffic, and that children were being educated more about the value of such things as wetlands and wildlife.

Some participants said quality of life meant different things to different people, and definitions of what constituted quality of life were by no means standardized. About 25% of the participants expressed deep dissatisfaction with the state of the current quality of life. They cited dust, heat and lack of general good will toward protection of wildlife as things that made them want to leave the Valley. Other said attitudes toward greenery were that it was expendable - that there are laws on the books calling for 10% of paved parking lots to have green areas throughout, but these regulations were not being honored. Others said the ecological heritage was one of the assets the region enjoyed, but that these assets were being rapidly lost due to growth and urban expansion.

Most participants felt land protection was positive, as long as public access was not denied. Land protection was seen as a way to support nature tourism and bring in more affluent tourists like birders. When the topic was raised, most were hopeful that the plan for expansion of the Laguna Atascosa Refuge would be successful, with the exception of one or two who felt that this would limit the ability of South Padre Island to grow.

Two participants mentioned that the presence of the Border Patrol affects the atmosphere; that while it is a positive control on river traffic, the troops, choppers and vehicles could

not provide a good quality of life atmosphere. Related comments focused on the razor wire and general ugliness of bridge crossings, the plastic bags littering the scenery and a variety of other negative contributors to the atmosphere. Some participants, particularly those not originally from the area, felt that these scenery detractors were somewhat invisible to many local residents.

Some focused on what they felt were low expectations (for oneself and of others) that contributed to quality of life problems. Other comments were that the stigma of an undereducated workforce would only change through removing social promotions, that the “migrant” society of the region - the numbers of people both passing through and coming and going - were having an affect on the substantive development of the functional community, and that “machismo” culture perpetuates certain attitudes towards women that might affect their professional advancement.

The topic of affordable housing did not surface frequently except as a reference to the housing in Port Isabel being less expensive than that of South Padre Island, so that some of the growth experienced by South Padre was spilling over. Some participants did feel housing prices were rising overall, but that in relation to the rest of the country were extremely low.

## ***#8 Communities need a Vision and a road map for how to get there***

- “As long as it isn’t too radical - too left or too right, people and politicians will generally support it.”
- “There are all kinds of plans sitting on shelves in people’s offices but we don’t ever get around to implementing them.”
- “We can plan as long as we want but we still need the funds to do it.”
- “If everybody agreed on what the vision was, we wouldn’t have people doing random things and everything looking haphazard and unplanned.”

### **Analysis**

Almost all of the participants mentioned that a lack of planning had had negative effects on quality of life and was contributing to the inability to meet the needs of an expanding population. However, not all were in agreement on how to realistically achieve the goals of a plan, if it did not come with funds attached. Others felt that the planning was not so important as the vision, and that a common vision was achievable through a variety of paths, or plans, as long as there was agreement regarding the vision itself.

Participants mentioned the Valley Chamber of Commerce and the Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council as important entities to conduct planning. They felt there needed to be a plan in place or in the works that would also serve as a description of the direction the region is headed in the year 2010. They talked about a need for leaders who would take strong stances on issues and establish standards according to a balanced vision. There was general agreement, however, that the process of reaching the vision was important.

As far as specific ideas for alternatives to current development practices; one participant mentioned wind power and wondered why it was not being fully utilized to generate sources of energy. With regard to additional land protection, about 85% were in favor of land protection in general, but most wanted to make sure public access would not be denied. One participant said that in order to educate people about the habitat and wildlife they had to have access to it, and that the infrastructure for the coexistence of people and wildlife just needed to be better developed.

Participants frequently mentioned tourism as a sector in need of development. One participant noted while it was unclear how prosperous San Antonio had become as a



result, the city had managed to capitalize on its cultural roots and develop a strong tourist market. This same participant mentioned that the Hispanic population in the US has a buying power equal to twice that of Mexico's Gross Domestic Product, which might lead to some interesting economic development avenues as a natural fit with the region.

Birding tourism was also mentioned often as a desirable market to develop. Several of the participants were concerned about the loss of bird habitat - including introduced habitats like citrus groves, and the need for more public support of land protection policies. Regarding agriculture, some participants were optimistic about new practices like "no-till" farming which preserves the topsoil, saves in water usage and saves some financial outlay for the farmer. One participant also mentioned the newly-developed "BT" corn and cotton as alternatives to herbicide usage.

Those who had some knowledge of the water planning process underway with the LRGV Development Council expressed that the next ten years would be critical in establishing some balance between agricultural, municipal and environmental water use, and that the Integrated Water Resource Plan would help in this process. Water conservation districts, or cooperative water management agreements where responsibilities for water management would be shared among public and private water users, were mentioned as one option that might lead to some positive outcomes. Some saw water conservation districts as a way to create a plan for either the protection or development of wetlands - especially some of the coastal and beach wetlands that are increasingly under pressure to be developed.

Along the lines of education and training, several participants noted that offering people an opportunity to learn how to live with dignity could be achieved through partnering with industry and working with school specialists toward "incremental promotion".

An example of positive industry and environmental sector partnerships mentioned was the effort by a seafood packing industry to mix high-nutrient shrimp shells with low nutrient saline dredge material to develop a richer soil base and test for success with native plants. Several participants thought industry could take more responsibility to take care of their surroundings and offer more, rather than less, aesthetic appeal; industries elsewhere included recreational areas and green spaces for employees as part of the package.

## ***Willacy County - A different growth scenario***

Willacy County's current population is much lower, at 17,000 residents, and some of its needs are very distinct from Cameron County, so a separate section of this report is dedicated to Willacy County.

The Willacy County participants mentioned that their situation was the opposite of Cameron County in terms of projected growth, and perhaps for the better. However, unemployment in Willacy County is also high and it is a depressed area, despite the fact that there are no colonias. Physically, there is no natural drainage in Willacy County and the groundwater is poor, so participants recognized a certain limitation on just how much the area could develop. Port Mansfield is dependent upon the North Alamo water district, with pipelines that extend 80 miles from the Rio Grande, so in order to grow the town would have to locate more potable water. Rangeland is a positive feature, but ranching is becoming more and more of a financial struggle as well.

The Willacy County participants expressed a desire to develop their nature tourism market - specifically through helping protect the sport-fish industry that operates out of the Port and expanding birding tourism. One Willacy County representative was concerned about the shrimp aquaculture facility being proposed for the area (specifically, the effluent from the facility) simply because the location is so close to the Laguna Madre.

The Intercoastal Waterway, according to one participant, had had net positive results for the area, with the cut (the opening from the Laguna Madre to the Gulf of Mexico) at Port Mansfield contributing to the flow of freshwater into the system. The participant referred to the controversy over dredging the GIWW and mentioned that this should be addressed but that the Port of Mansfield could not exist without the Waterway, since it keeps barges traveling through the area and the navigation district in business.

***Responses to: What types of assistance might help communities to achieve progress toward sustainability goals?***

- Conduct research on the strengths and weaknesses of the region or city in question, evaluate options and provide suggestions for how to capitalize on strengths.
- Establish a mediation center and provide a venue for groups to come to the table and work out solutions.
- Develop a format or template for evaluating decisions that will assist community decision-makers in guiding the future.
- Develop a contact list of people with expertise in certain areas who might be called upon for assistance.
- Identify issues of concern and develop “case studies” of successes that have been applied elsewhere that might generate local solutions.
- Provide a venue for presenting concerns to decision-makers and make sure all stakeholders, including industry and Mexico, are involved in this discussion.
- Develop more regional environmental awareness programs.

## *What's Next?*

Project organizers will be working on several initiatives related to the suggestions provided by leaders:

- Community “indicators” research for Cameron and Willacy counties, and for Matamoros and Valle Hermoso;
- Diagnosis of community needs for the coastal fishing villages of Mezquital and Higuierillas, Tamaulipas;
- Public outreach regarding the economic value of natural resource protection;
- “State of the Region” report to be released in Spring 2000
- Binational Community Forum in the Spring of 2000

## **Appendix A: Leaders' Forum Participants**

<b>First Name</b>	<b>Last Name</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
Jess	Alford	Agent	Lynne Tate Real Estate
Krishna	Ayer	Program Coordinator	Cameron & Willacy Counties Community Projects, Inc.
Joe	Barrera	Manager	Brownsville Irrigation District
Denise	Blanchard	District Director	Office of Congressman Ortiz
Rosa	Bodden	Leader	Valley Interfaith
Larry	Brown	Planning Director	City of Brownsville
Terry	Cook	President	South Padre Island Chamber of Commerce
Bob	Cornelison	Director	Port Isabel/San Benito Navigation District
Larry	Ditto	LRGVNWR	U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Linda	Forse		The Language Institute - UTB/TSC
Kathleen	Garrett	Environmental Director	Public Utilities Board
Louis	Hamper		Harlingen Shrimp Farm
Eric	Hellberg	Planning Dept	City of Harlingen
Gordon	Hill	General Manager	Bayview Irrigation District #11
Richard	Hinojosa	Program Director	LRGV Development Council
Les	Hodgson	Manager	High Seas
Dr. Mona	Hopkins	Area Administrator	Brownsville ISD
Berniece	Jones	Vice President	Port Mansfield Chamber of Commerce
Steve	Labuda	Manager	Laguna Atascosa NWR
Harris	Lasseigne		Texas Shrimp Association
David	Lee	President/CEO	Brownsville Convention & Visitor's Bureau
Elaine	Lockhart	Director	Valley Proud Environmental Council
Georgiana	Matz	Chair	South Padre Island Community Foundation
Melvin	Maxwell	Refuge Operations Specialist	Laguna Atascosa NWR
Cesar	Pacheco		Rancher
Michael	Putegnat	Director	Michael Putegnat Advising
Tony	Reisinger		Tx A&M Marine Advisory Service
Pedro	Salazar	UTPA-SBDC	UT-Pan Am
Dr. Noe	Sauceda	Area Administrator	Brownsville ISD
Sharon	Swanson	Treasurer	Lower Laguna Madre Foundation
Judy	Vera	Leader	Valley Interfaith
Pat	Wade		UT-Brownsville
Mike	Wilson	Director	Willacy County Navigation District