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House subcommittee chair calls on Chertoff to meet with border mayors

By Steve Taylor

BROWNSVILLE, January 4, 2008 - The chairman of the Appropriation committee's Homeland Security subcommittee has urged Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff to meet with Texas border mayors about the border fence plan.

U.S. Rep. David Price, D-North Carolina, made clear his support for greater consultation on the federal government's controversial barrier project in a Dec. 21 letter. In the letter, Price noted that the Texas Border Coalition (TBC), led by Eagle Pass Mayor Chad Foster, had called for a series of meetings with Chertoff.

"The series of meetings proposed by Mayor Foster on behalf of the TBC is consistent with the local government consultation requirement in the Fiscal Year Consolidation Appropriations Act, H.R. 2764," Price wrote.

"Mayor Foster's letter to you indicates that the Texas border communities are eager to work cooperatively with the Department of Homeland Security to address the border security needs of the country. I urge you to begin the local government consultation process as soon as possible."

Chertoff has yet to reply to Foster's Dec. 19, 2007, letter. In the letter, TBC called on Chertoff to immediately withdraw the draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Rio Grande Valley border fence plan in the light of a new congressional mandate.

The Fiscal Year Consolidation Appropriations Act, H.R. 2764 overrides a number of the provisions contained in the 2006 Secure Fence Act. Congress no longer requires that two layers of fencing be erected and does not specify where barriers should be built.

The omnibus bill also states that alternative tactical infrastructure can be considered. And, Chertoff must not only engage with border communities on the location and type of barrier to be erected, he must report back to Congress on how the consultations are going. If this is not done, up to half of the funds allocated for the fence could be withheld.

"The draft EIS categorically rejects all suggested alternatives to the department's proposed route and construction of the border wall in the Rio Grande Valley sector," Foster wrote, in his letter to Chertoff.

"To leave that document pending (or worse, to continue its completion) during the consultative process would predetermine the outcome, which should be unacceptable to all parties involved."

Valley mayors have complained bitterly that Border Patrol developed a plan to build 70 miles of fencing in the Valley without any input from elected officials. No town hall meetings have taken place and the three "open house" events staged by DHS in Brownsville, McAllen, and Rio Grande City in December did not allow for official dialogue.

Foster said the TBC wants a scoping meeting with DHS officials in Washington, D.C., during the week of Jan. 21, 2008, followed by a series of meetings beginning the first week of February in each of the counties affected by the proposed wall. At the end of that consultation process in April, Foster said, TBC wants a meeting between DHS, elected officials and state permitting agencies in Austin.

"We have long contended that it would be counter-productive for Washington to dictate the design and



U.S. Rep. David Price, D-N.C., chairs the Appropriation committee's Homeland Security subcommittee

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location of a 700-mile fence without consultation with state and local officials or consideration of viable alternatives," Foster wrote.

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Foster pointed out that over the past several months, border communities have proposed a number of alternatives to improve border security "without incurring the cost and headaches that a Washington-dictated solution would create over private property rights and environmental concerns."

TBC executive committee members say they have developed a good working relationship with Price, thanks to meetings with the committee chairman in Washington, Del Rio and Brownsville last year. They believe these meetings may have been a factor in Price's decision to write to Price.

In January 2007, U.S. Rep. Ciro Rodriguez set up a meeting for TBC with Price in Washington. Price had only just taken over the Appropriation Committee's subcommittee on homeland security.

The border mayors in attendance were El Paso's John Cook, Eagle Pass's Chad Foster, Laredo's Raul Salinas, Rio Grande City's Kevin Hiles, McAllen's Richard Cortez, Hidalgo's John David Franz, and then-Brownsville Mayor Eddie Treviño.

"Chairman Price listened to our concerns and said he would work with us. And, our border congressmen have been supportive throughout," said Treviño, after the meeting.

"Naturally, we would have preferred Congress to have paid attention to us when they were crafting their legislation. However, the wall has not been built and the money has not been appropriated. It is not too late."

Foster said he was impressed with Price's knowledge of border security issues.

"Chairman Price believes that Congress must have had the Arizona desert in mind when they pushed through a multi-layered fence in the last congressional session," Foster told the Guardian at the time.

"Price discussed his own travels to Texas and his awareness of the unique differences between the Arizona border - made up of mostly federal and state lands - and the Texas border which has a natural geographic boundary in the Rio Grande, and consists of private ranches, homes, and populated municipalities."

Foster said Price also made it a point to say how impressed he was with the fact that ten border mayors from Brownsville to El Paso were all in agreement over the issue of the fence and asked the group to stay in close contact with the Texas congressional delegation.

Rodriguez said Price helped him secure a key amendment in the Appropriations bill that requires community input for proposed fencing and the restoration of \$15 million in grants for local law enforcement along the border to address the growing problem of drug smuggling and human trafficking.

In July 2007, Price visited Del Rio and Brownsville to learn more about border security from the perspective of local elected officials.

"We reiterated our message - that one size does not fit all," said Foster, referring to those meetings. "The problem we have had is that most of the elected officials in Washington have no idea what life is like on the border and they have no inclination to get it. If you gave them a map, they would not be able to find the Rio Grande."

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