

## BILL ANALYSIS

Senate Research Center

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Engrossed

### AUTHOR'S / SPONSOR'S STATEMENT OF INTENT

Border communities, such as Laredo, contend with heightened responsibilities in the world today, and since the advent of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, Laredo has become the busiest United States port of entry from Mexico and the sixth-largest customs district in the country, with more than \$167 billion in total trade in 2007; while the heavy flow of international commerce is a boon to the local economy, it presents tremendous challenges to the first responders who protect the state and the nation as well as their own community.

The Bureau of Transportation Statistics calculated that more than 1.5 million trucks and 300,000 rail containers crossed through Laredo in 2006, and according to Texas Department of Transportation estimates, truck tonnage will increase by some 250 percent by 2030; about half of this cargo includes hazardous material, and more than 60 million square feet of warehouse space in the city also contains significant amounts of hazardous materials, creating a tempting target for terrorists and enormous potential for a disaster that could not only endanger public health but also disrupt major transportation systems and negatively impact the national economy.

Relatively isolated on its side of the border, Laredo is 150 miles from the nearest sizable U.S. city, and its police, fire, and public health personnel are the primary emergency responders for a region of more than 3,000 square miles; this includes a long stretch of the Rio Grande, which is the primary drinking water source for Laredo, Nuevo Laredo, and other communities in the Rio Grande Valley, making swift response to any contamination extremely critical; in addition, the United States-Mexico Border Health Commission has recognized the region as among those most vulnerable to perils such as bioterrorism and epidemics.

The Laredo Police Department has increased vigilance over border activity since the attacks of September 11, 2001, and confronts an escalating threat from violent international drug traffickers, who have been linked to terrorism; the fire department responds to a wide range of emergencies along the Rio Grande, from the rescue or recovery of individuals who have attempted to cross into the United States to bomb threats.

The emergency response system in Laredo requires a higher level of funding to ensure public safety and meet homeland security imperatives; for instance, the city has only one hazardous materials response unit, purchased in 1991 and long overdue for upgrades; it lacks a detection system for chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and high-yield explosive weapons, as well as for quick assessment and management of industrial accidents; among other urgent needs are enhanced police staffing, improved radio coverage in remote areas, and construction of a secure regional emergency operations center where safety personnel and local, state, and federal government officials can coordinate decisions and resources in a crisis.

With an estimated population of 217,000, Laredo is a much smaller city than other major United States ports; its own budget is accordingly limited, and at the same time, its size has been an impediment in the pursuit of federal assistance; homeland security funding formulas currently use census figures rather than threat risk in determining eligibility for such programs as the Urban Areas Security Initiative and Targeted Infrastructure Capability Grants Program, and, as a land port, Laredo is likewise ineligible for the Port Security Grant Program, even though it processes more international shipments than such grant recipients as Mobile, Alabama, and Lake Charles, Louisiana.

Laredo, as the nation's second-busiest land gateway, shoulders unique law enforcement, public safety, and national security burdens far out of proportion to the size of its population; increased

federal funding is necessary to strengthen first response where local agencies with strained budgets are responsible for protecting our nation's critical infrastructure and addressing international threats.

**RESOLVED**

That the 81st Legislature of the State of Texas hereby respectfully urge the United States Congress to refine Department of Homeland Security policy to consider risk levels as well as population size in assessing the financial needs of first responders in border communities along the international boundary created by the Rio Grande.

That the Texas secretary of state forward official copies of this resolution to the president of the United States, to the speaker of the house of representatives and the president of the senate of the United States Congress, and to all the members of the Texas delegation to the congress with the request that this resolution be officially entered in the Congressional Record as a memorial to the Congress of the United States of America.