

# Brownsville Chamber of Commerce



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# President's Message



This public policy manual has been compiled to educate our members and to communicate to our elected officials and decision makers where the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce stands on numerous issues important to the business community. Each policy has been adopted by our board of directors. Inside, you will find a short explanation of each issue, along with our stated position and our recommendations to lawmakers.

The Brownsville Chamber of Commerce represents businesses across the Rio Grande Valley. We act as the voice for business and are committed to ensuring a favorable economic, legal, and regulatory climate for the business community. Each policy position we have taken has been carefully voted by our board. Our mission is to publicly support policies that will facilitate economic growth in our community. We hope that you will take the time to become engaged in these issues and, in turn, communicate with your elected representatives. This manual has been developed as a tool to educate you about the issues and help you take part in the legislative process.

At all levels of government, well-intentioned initiatives often have unintended consequences. Without input from the business community, these initiatives could adversely impact the ability of businesses to generate jobs and to create higher standards of living. However, when business leaders communicate with their elected officials, better public policies result.

This manual includes contact information for your elected representatives at the local and state levels as well as tips on how to communicate with them. To help facilitate and encourage dialogue between our members and our elected officials.

To accomplish our many legislative objectives, it is essential that the local business community becomes engaged in the issues and active in communicating our positions to our elected officials. We trust that you will find this public policy manual useful.

Onward,



Angela R. Burton



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*Policy*

**Policy Statements**

*Statements*



The Brownsville Chamber of Commerce and other Brownsville economic development organizations are committed to ensuring Brownsville is at the forefront of emerging markets and industries. Economic development tools including the Texas Enterprise Fund, the Skill Development Fund and the Emerging Technology Fund are all essential for Texas communities to stay competitive worldwide.

Relocating to Brownsville includes the following competitive advantage: proximity to strategic markets including Mexico, excellent infrastructure, skilled workforce and favorable business climate.

- Support continued use of a locally approved 1/2 cent sales tax collected by cities to fund economic development efforts.
- Oppose efforts to reduce local control of these funds or efforts to limit the uses of these funds. Because these funds are local funds, taxpayers should retain the right to manage their use so long as they are used for economic development purposes.
- Support the removal of county average wage restrictions that limit a local government's use of these funds for local job training purposes.
- Support efforts to clarify that the purpose of the sales tax funds is to serve as economic development tools and to prevent raids on the funds for projects that are not related to economic development.
- Support \$10 million in increased funding for the Skills Development Fund administered by the Texas Workforce Commission. Maintain Skills Development Fund grants at the Texas Workforce Commission to improve workforce training.
- Support continued funding for the Texas Enterprise Fund (TEF) and the claw-back provisions that safeguard Texans investment in the future. The TEF has created thousands of jobs for Texans serving as a focused, deal-closing tool to help local communities secure high impact projects.
- Support continued funding the Emerging Technology Fund and associated Regional Centers for Innovation and Commercialization (RCIC). RCIC's are serving as a catalyst for emerging technology research, development, commercialization, and start-up incubation throughout Texas. This program is helping build the next generation of businesses that will employ Texans.



Everyday the Rio Grande Valley educates more than a quarter of a million of tomorrows leaders. However, a great deal of them will not finish high school. In Texas, the state education agency reports a very small drop out rate. But research into the numbers shows that in fact, Texas has a very high attrition rate. This is defined as the number of students in a cohort (say beginning ninth grade) and the number who actually complete high school.

In Texas, high school attrition rates are disturbing, but the numbers are especially bothersome for the Hispanic population (60% graduation rate). The attrition rate has profoundly negative implications in Texas, both socially and economically.

The Federal Reserve Bank in Dallas estimated in 2001, the loss to Cameron County alone was \$744.7 million. That was \$3,143 per person. In neighboring Hidalgo County the estimated loss was \$1.2 billion.

Socially, dropouts earn \$200,000 less than high school graduates and \$800,000 less than college graduates over their lifetime. High-risk behaviors like teen pregnancy, crime, violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and suicide are more prevalent among high school dropouts. Dropouts comprise nearly half of the prison population in the U.S. and comprise nearly half of all households receiving public assistance.

Dropouts can increase expenses to a local community by \$500,000 in terms of public assistance, health care, and incarceration costs over 25 to 30 years.

The Brownsville Chamber of Commerce recognizes the economic and social importance of Improving High School Graduation and College-Going Rates. Therefore, the Brownsville Chamber supports legislative action that:

- Supports legislation that tightens controls on how career and technology monies are allocated. Districts that receive funding for career and technology should offer courses that truly prepare students with on-site or virtual on-site training rather than traditional classroom settings. Encourage increased funding for on-line curriculum and on-line testing.
- Supports measures that financially reward campuses for retaining students beyond the ninth grade.
- Supports the continuation of funding for GO Centers that serve as primary points of coordination between the College for Texans campaign (to increase college enrollment) and local communities.

- Supports reasonable regulatory and legislative oversight of higher education system coupled with clear statements of goals, expectations and accountability of results. The state should encourage collaborative approaches among Texas' higher education institutions in research and development funding strategies, technology deployment and distance education in order to avoid duplication and waste.
- Supports education at the junior college level as an important contributor to training students for jobs in the workforce.
- Supports measures that encourage parents to become active partners with their children's teachers and administrators.
- Supports legislation that allows school districts to financially reward campuses that achieve exemplary student performance.
- Supports the implementation and evaluation of a well-designed school choice pilot program, allowing students in low-performing public schools to attend public or qualified private schools of their choice. The pilot program must be of sufficient magnitude to assess the impact a choice program would have on the students and the public school system.
- Supports legislation requiring more financial transparency in school spending so taxpayers will see how their investment is being managed.
- Supports increased funding for the Skills Development Program administered by the Texas Workforce Commission Maintain Skills Development Fund grants at the Texas Workforce Commission to improve workforce training.
- Supports legislation that raises standards for students taking the TAKS test. Current standards only require students to earn 60 or above to pass reading, writing and social studies portion of the test and a 40 and 35 to pass mathematics and science. An immediate across the board standard of 60% should be set and then increase annually.
- Provides tax incentives that encourage business participation in education initiatives.
- Supports the expansion of the Texas Early Education Model (TEEM) now improving the quality of pre-k education in Brownsville, in Cameron County and in dozens of communities and thousands of classrooms across the state of Texas.



The United States has the world's best health care system, but coverage is being priced out of reach for more and more American citizens. Five straight years of double-digit health insurance premium increases have pushed the number of Americans who lack coverage to over 45 million. Companies struggle to find health care plans that provide adequate coverage and are still affordable.

The Brownsville Chamber of Commerce recognizes that most health care coverage is provided by employers. To make it easier for employers and their employees to afford the healthcare coverage they need and the quality they deserve, the Brownsville Chamber supports legislative action that:

- Supports the continuation of the employer based health care coverage and provides economic incentives for businesses who provide employee health care plans.
- Allows companies to band together and form Small Business Health Plans, which can negotiate lower prices and better choices than small businesses can find on their own.
- Supports legislation that encourages more Brownsville citizens to save for medical expenses tax-free by expanding Health Saving Accounts and allowing those with Flexible Spending Accounts to roll over unused balances to pay for future medical expenses.
- Support Medicare reforms with appropriate levels of reimbursement for hospitals, promote pay-for-performance for doctors, modernize the care provided through a prescription drug benefit, and preserve the overall solvency of the program.
- Encourages the funding and implementation necessary to bring about an information technology revolution to the entire healthcare industry.
- Supports legislation that strengthens and improves Medicaid and CHIP programs with comprehensive reforms which include programs that maximize federal funds and encourage budget certainty while providing high quality care through the utilization of managed care in service delivery to those enrolled in Medicaid and CHIP.



There is no question that the U.S. immigration system is broken. There are an estimated 10-12 million undocumented migrants in the United States, and deporting them would be the equivalent of removing the population of the state of Ohio—not a realistic option.

The Chamber of Commerce recognizes that our immigration system is broken. To fix it, a comprehensive approach is needed because it is easier to enforce laws that make sense and can work.

Nonetheless, Immigration is a federal issue and should be addressed federally.

The Brownsville Chamber of Commerce opposes:

- Immigration legislation filed by Rep. Leo Berman that restricts birthright citizenship in Texas.
- Immigration legislation that is divisive in nature.



A report written by the Perryman Group clearly demonstrates that the coast plays a significant role in the economic health of Texas. Nearly 40 percent of the Texas economic output is critically linked to the area. About 44 percent of total personal income and 40 percent of the jobs in Texas are dependent on key industry sectors in the coastal counties. When Katrina-level damages are allocated across the coastal economy, the predicted losses are astounding. More than \$52 billion of gross state product is at risk; \$44 billion in personal income; and almost 617,000 jobs are at risk. If a storm of this magnitude were to hit the Houston ship channel, the aggregate losses to the Texas economy would be even greater. The message to legislators and to Texans is clear: the mega-storms being predicted today are a concern for the entire state, not just the coast.

Current funding mechanism exposes the state of Texas to significant budgetary risk in the form of reduced premium tax receipts. More than \$3.2 billion in premium tax receipts are at risk over the 5-year period from 2006 through 2010, and potentially much more over longer time horizons. For that reason the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce supports:

- Legislation for the refunding of the Texas Windstorm Insurance Association (TWIA) that allows the State to sell pre and post event bonds.
- Any change in the Windstorm Pool funding or structure should support and encourage the writing of voluntary wind insurance by insurance companies along the TIER 1 and TIER 2 coast counties.
- Legislation that provides rate equitability to foster a competitive business environment.



Abuses of our legal system have grown in number and size in recent years, imposing huge costs on business and, eventually, on all of us. Increasingly lawsuits are crafted on the flimsiest of grounds and then brought across country to be filed in the friendliest courts in an effort to find verdicts. Companies have been unfairly found liable for damages that they could not possibly have foreseen, sometimes for which they are only slightly responsible.

Medical malpractice lawsuits have pushed medical liability insurance premiums so high that doctors and clinics are limiting or even closing their practices, leaving patients without care. Courts are clogged with asbestos lawsuits by people who show no signs of illness, while claimants who are clearly sick wait for benefits they desperately need.

The Brownsville Chamber of Commerce opposes these developments. To restore our legal system to the point where all can look to it for fair and impartial justice, we support legislative action to:

- Hold down the explosive growth in medical liability awards and insurance costs by limiting awards for non-economic damages (all medical costs and lost earnings could still be recovered).
- Cap punitive damage awards against small businesses, and replace joint and several (“deep pockets”) liability with proportional liability based on the amount of damage actually caused by the company involved.
- Move the process for compensating victims of asbestos poisoning out of the courtroom by creating a trust fund to meet the needs of the sick and their families.
- Punish those who attempt to bring or who lose frivolous lawsuits in Texas courts.
- Stop obesity-related lawsuits before they start.
- Create mechanisms and incentives for the use of alternative dispute resolution.
- To allow the Texas Supreme Court to create special courts and/or assign cases to specific courts in matters requiring medical and technical expertise.



Small businesses make a distinct and creative contribution to Brownsville's economy. For most Brownsville citizens seeking economic independence, small business ownership offers the greatest opportunity.

Small businesses produce the major share of business innovation. Their numbers make them the largest source of private employment and the most tangible local representation of the private enterprise system in America today.

One barrier to small business ownership is access to capital, especially long-term debt financing. The Brownsville Chamber of Commerce recognizes that ensuring the availability of financing to foster the growth and expansion of small businesses is in the best interest of Brownsville's economy.

- Pass legislation that would eliminate the hurdle of "substantial justification" and allow small businesses to be reimbursed for attorneys' fees when successfully challenging government's regulatory actions in court.
- Oppose efforts to enact a "Sarbanes-Oxley" law on the state level.
- Block attempts to increase the minimum wage.
- Support efforts for Texas to work with Federal Government in order to provide for a stable SBA 7(a) and 504 lending programs.



The nation's telecommunications laws have failed to keep pace with advances in technology, have stifled new investments by the private sector, and have denied consumers and our economy the full benefits of a wide variety of new telecommunications services and choices.

Recognizing that an economic climate that fosters innovation and investment in its telecommunications industry is vital to a healthy and vibrant business community, the Chamber of Commerce supports:

- Telecommunications policies that foster innovation, expand consumer choice, spur investment, create jobs, enhance efficiency, and increase productivity.
- A statutory and regulatory structure that allows telecommunications markets to be driven by consumer demand advances in technology, and competition between telecommunication companies, while encouraging public safety, consumer protection, access for people with disabilities, and other public interest goals.
- Universal service that ensures affordable basic telephone service for all Texans.
- Support safeguarding the policies passed last session which promote investment and competition.



A fully integrated transportation network is essential to our economy. In addition to traveling to and from work, we count on transportation every time we make an on-line purchase on the Internet, every time we expect an urgent overnight delivery, and every time we shop for fresh foods and produce at the local market. Without extensive, well-maintained roads and highways, a well-managed public transit and rail system, and modern air and seaports, our quality of life suffers.

Knowing that goods and services can be provided only as fast and effectively as our transportation system allows, the Brownville Chamber of Commerce supports:

- Support funding for the Texas Mobility Fund, the preservation of new funding tools, and the continuation of the flexibility provided to regional mobility authorities by HB 3588.
- Support continued efforts to improve State Hwy 77 to interstate standards from Corpus Christi to Brownsville as well as continued support for I-69 or TTC 69.
- Support the development and expansion of air transport infrastructure (Brownsville/South Padre Island International Airport), including runways and terminals, to facilitate the ongoing increase in passenger miles and the expected tripling of air cargo by 2015.
- Support the development and funding of international trade corridors to accommodate current and future Brownsville and South Texas' transportation demands resulting from the North American Free Trade Agreement and/or the Central American Free Trade Agreement.
- Oppose multiple diversions of gas tax revenue to non transportation purposes, except for the constitutionally-required percentage used to fund our educational system, by reducing diversions to the fullest extent.
- Support capitalization of the Rail Relocation and Improvement Fund for the purpose of funding high impact rail relocation projects that can improve public safety and streamline transportation operations.
- Support legislation that would enable the State's counties to assess a local option fee of up to \$10.00 to be added to the registration fees for each vehicle and trailer licensed in the county, as a means of generating additional revenues to support the State's public transportation providers.
- Support setting the Legislative Appropriations Request (LAR) at \$90 million for state funding of rural and small urban transit (exclusive of Medicaid and Health and Human Services client-based transportation).
- Support any funding in excess of current biennial allocation should be distributed by established formula rather than discretionary basis.
- In the event that state appropriations increase substantially, consider restorative measures to mitigate the adverse impacts of funding reductions by small urban systems.



Cameron County depends heavily upon the travel and tourism industry. It is a \$561.1 million industry that generates \$12.8 million a year in tax revenue, and employs more than 7,850 people. Of the \$569.1 million spent by visitor, \$150.8 million was spent on lodging, \$105.7 million at restaurants, and \$312.6 million on a broad range of goods and services including transportation, entertainment and shopping.

The Brownsville Chamber of Commerce appreciates the crucial role travel and tourism plays in our community and Texas' economy. Therefore, we support efforts to revitalize growth in all sectors of the industry and we support actions to:

- Seek increased investment in transportation infrastructure, particularly aviation, to meet the needs of the travel industry.
- Identify and implement state funded cooperative programs that will help Brownsville develop its historical identity and promote the preservation of our historically important sites and architecturally significant buildings. This will enhance Brownsville attractiveness as a tourist destination.
- Identify and develop more opportunities for the State of Texas to sponsor cooperative (city/state) tourism development initiatives and opportunities in the U.S., Mexico, and Canada that will encourage tourism to Brownsville.
- Preserve, protect and encourage tourism from Mexico by working with the federal government to seek fair and equitable immigration policies for and treatment of Mexican Nationals at our Texas-Mexico Border Ports of Entry.
- Identify and implement state funded cooperative programs that will help Brownsville develop its natural beauty, and wildlife diversity to increase eco-tourism to our area.



With our state's population expected to double by 2050, having enough water to meet our needs is essential to economic development.

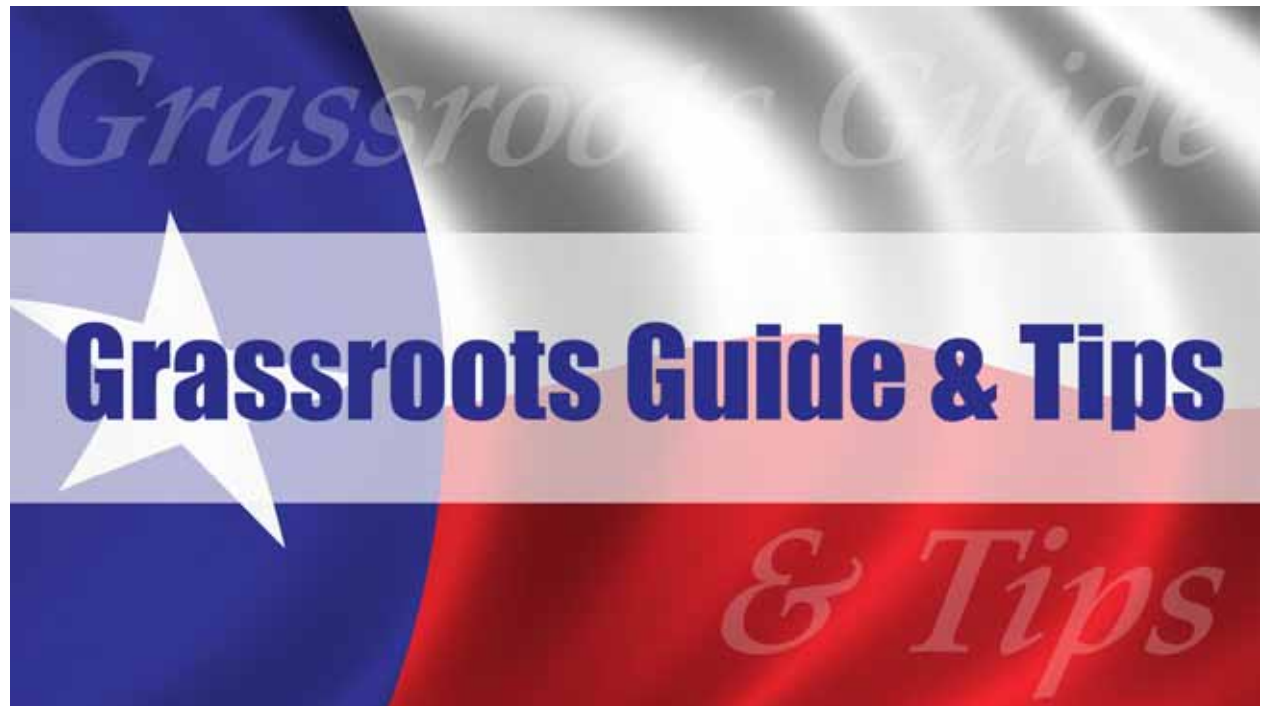
Especially if Texas continues to face prolonged drought conditions such as recently experienced.

For example, by 2050, any cities and other water users will need to either reduce demand (through conservation and/or drought management) or develop additional sources of water beyond those currently available to meet their needs during droughts.

Through the passage of SB 1 in 1997, the regional and state water planning process focuses on identifying the actions necessary to meet our water needs during a time of drought.

After the passage of SB 1, 16 regional planning groups submitted to the TWDB regional water plans describing how local entities may address future water supply needs for the next 50 years. For that reason the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce supports:

- Continued grant funding for the Lower Rio Grande Valley Brownsville Seawater Desalination Pilot Project.





The Brownsville Chamber of Commerce wants to keep you informed about issues important to your business. Below are three steps outlined to help you get involved and become active:

**1. Learn about the legislators who represent you.**

Through Texas Legislature Online you can obtain information on who your legislators are, what committees they serve on, their voting records on business issues, their contact information, and their political backgrounds.

**2. Track the legislative and regulatory issues you care about most.**

The Texas Legislature deals with hundreds of issues every session and the Texas Legislature online keeps you up to date on the issues you care about. You may also want to request that your legislators put your name on their mailing lists. That way, they will be able to inform you when they are working on issues that could directly affect your business. <http://www.capitol.state.tx.us/>

**3. TAKE ACTION!**

We understand that your time is valuable and that taking action on a legislative or regulatory issue is often not your top priority. However, in politics the adage that “the squeaky wheel gets the grease” is true, and too often the special interests seeking more regulations and higher taxes on businesses take the time to communicate their opinions. Take the time to write a letter or send a fax. Often comments can be made via online comment sections.



## Writing Effective Letters to Elected Officials

Writing a personalized letter to your legislators is still the most effective way to express your opinions. It is impossible for elected officials to know how every bill they vote on will affect your business. A well-written letter will often help lawmakers understand the critical elements of pending legislation before they take a position for or against a particular bill. If you are not sure who represents you, or how to contact them, go to [www.capitol.state.tx.us](http://www.capitol.state.tx.us)

Address for Texas Representative is:  
The Honorable (full name)  
Texas House of Representatives  
Austin, Texas

Address for Texas Senator is:  
The Honorable (full name)  
Texas Senate  
Austin, Texas

1. Include your complete return address to prove that you are a constituent.
2. Write on one issue per letter and identify the bill number (e.g., H.R. 215) in the first paragraph.
3. Keep your message local, personal, and concise. Provide specific examples of how the legislation will impact your business, industry, and employees. Try to write no more than one page.
4. Above all, maintain a professional tone in your letter. We know that you feel strongly about your views, but showing anger toward your legislators will only cause them to discount your opinion. You need to foster a positive, and ideally long-term, relationship with your legislators if you want them to be receptive.
5. Provide background on your industry and the issue. Don't assume that your legislators are familiar with the impact any bill will have on your business or that they have already taken a position on it.
6. Clearly state the action you would like your lawmaker to take, e.g., "please vote against H.R. 215."
7. Ask for a reply that outlines your lawmaker's position.
8. Choose your battles. While you should try to build a personal relationship with your elected officials, you should not write so often that you become known solely for your letter writing or for having an opinion on one issue.



### **Phoning Your Legislators**

When you call your elected officials, a staff member will answer the phone. You should request, but do not expect, to be connected to your legislator. Usually you will be asked to leave a detailed message with that staff member. You may also ask to be transferred to the chief of staff or the legislative assistant who handles that particular issue.

- Emphasize that you are a constituent. Be sure to leave your full name and address so that the legislator can mail you a response.
- Explain your standpoint on the legislation in as much detail as you are comfortable with. You should always be prepared to explain why you do or do not support a specific bill, so keep our communications nearby to use as a reference.
- If you are speaking to a staff member, ask for his or her insight and the member's position.

### **Sending E-mails to Your Legislators**

As e-mail became a mainstream form of communication, it was often heard that legislative offices could not keep up with the large quantity of messages that they were receiving and that they were doubtful of their validity. As a result of a recent study, however, we have learned that technology is now in place to handle the increased volume of e-mails, and that personalized e-mails can actually have a lot of influence on some legislators' positions. Here are some tips for getting involved:

1. Send detailed, personalized e-mails to your Legislative members.

As long as you include your name, address and Zip code, the impact of specific legislation on your business, and your reason for your position, e-mails are as well received as personal letters sent on letterhead.

2. Quality is more persuasive than quantity.

One well-supported and rational argument can carry more weight than even hundreds of copies of an identical letter.

3. Know your audience.

When we ask you to get involved on behalf of the business community, you can be assured that we have done research on your fellow members positions for you and have represented their views accurately. Two things often need to be pointed out to frustrated activists:

- Your message will not be processed unless you live in that legislator's district.
- Staffers remember being insulted or bombarded by letters and will not help those people or organizations in the future.





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### Cameron County Judge and County Commissioners

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