

# 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. This manual has been adopted by our board of directors. Inside, you will find a short explanation of each issue, along with our stated position .

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. 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 officials.

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,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Angela R. Burton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Angela R. Burton, IOM  
President/CEO



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According to the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA), Texas ranks 49th out of the 50 states in per capita funding for the arts. Texas spends \$0.22 in per capita funding as compared with the average per capita funding for all state arts agencies of \$1.18. Hawaii led the states with \$6.92 in per capita arts funding.

Creative organizations in Brownsville provide arts and cultural service that expand far beyond the walls of a theater, concert hall, or museum. Their efforts contribute to positive solutions to many of the problematic issues facing the state.

CEOs report that stimulating creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship are among their top ten concerns. They also report that new hires today need creativity and innovation, as well as critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills. Both school superintendents and employers rank arts study and experience in the performing arts and entertainment as the top factors for instilling creativity into the workforce.

The creative industries in Texas and in Brownsville are a direct link to providing and equipping a creative workforce for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is prudent for the state to invest in their efforts, and it demonstrates foresight.

- Supports a \$12,000,000 each year of the biennium for Arts Create, a grant category intended to provide grants focused on operating support for arts and cultural organizations. By providing infrastructure support, The Texas Commission on the Arts (TCA) will help creative organizations focus on economic development, cultural tourism, and quality of life issues. All grants awarded in this category will have a dollar-to-dollar match, thus generating private support as well.
- Supports \$8,000,000 each year of the biennium for a grant category called Arts Respond. TCA will focus these funds on support for projects that specifically reflect the state's priorities: education, health and human service, economic development, public safety and criminal justice, and natural resources and agriculture.



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 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 the award of grants for research and development programs via the Texas Enterprise Fund and the Emerging Technology Fund. This in return will support for development of a Nano Biotechnology Laboratory at the International, Technology, Education and Commerce (ITECC) campus of the University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College.
- Support 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. Financial support for such programs need to be secured to ensure that the area's workforce is trained for such operations as Keppel AmFELS and Valley Baptist Medical Center, both of which are successfully utilized the program.
- 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 serve as a catalyst for emerging technology research, development, commercialization, and start-up incubation throughout Texas. This program help builds the next generation of businesses that will employ Texans.
- Continue to support local control and flexibility in the use of tax abatements, tax increment financing, reinvestment zones and other incentives to promote economic development and job creation. Additionally, support the ability of local taxing districts to phase in tax abatements. In recent years, Texas has seen its competitiveness fall in certain industries. Lastly, encourage the legislature to evaluate Texas' competitiveness and the role that taxes and other incentives play.



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.

- 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.
- Support Senate Bill 21 and House Bill 130. These companion bills call for increased funding for Full-Day High-Quality Pre-Kindergarten Programs with an Emphasis on Local, Integrated Community-Based Partnerships.
- Supports strengthening accountability to provide fair, accurate, and understandable information on the performance of our students and schools. Texas needs a new accountability system that will reward growth and is flexible for changes in the testing program.



- Supports measures that financially reward campuses for retaining students beyond the ninth grade.
- Support for a tuition revenue bond for projects pertaining to the University of Texas at Brownsville-Texas Southmost College.
- 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.
- Provides tax incentives that encourage business participation in education initiatives.



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:

- Support the designation of a Medical School Program and Facility at the University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College.
- 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.
- 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.
- Support legislation that would create a health care program that would allow parents with children who have disabilities buy into the state's Medicaid program.



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 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. 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.

Texas Windstorm Insurance Association (TWIA) provides insurance of last resort for hurricane and wind damage along the Texas Coast. TWIA is funded by premiums, assessments on all Texas Property Insurers, reinsurance, and a catastrophe trust fund. After exhausting other funding sources to pay claims, TWIA made an assessment of \$430 million to Texas property insurers for excess losses associated with Hurricane Ike. An assessment of \$100 million already had been made this year for damages caused by Hurricane Dolly in South Texas. Current funding mechanisms exposes the State of Texas to significant budgetary risk. The Brownsville Chamber of Commerce supports:

- Legislation that considers new funding mechanisms for the refunding of the Texas Windstorm Insurance Association (TWIA) yet fosters a competitive business environment for coastal counties.
- 
- Support legislation that increases the Texas Department of Insurance focus on identifying and prosecuting fraud and abuse within the workers' compensation system. Also, support incentives for identification and successful prosecution of workers' compensation fraud.
- 
- Support legislation that increases access to health insurance for small businesses and individuals.



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.

- Oppose efforts to enact a “Sarbanes-Oxley” law on the state level.
- Support efforts for Texas to work with Federal Government in order to provide for a stable SBA 7(a) and 504 lending programs.
- Support micro lending of loans between \$500 and \$50,000 to small businesses, through a dedicated part of the Texas Enterprise Fund or reinstate the Capital Access Program.
- Oppose proposals to increase minimum wage.



- Support a graduated approach to the franchise (margin) tax for businesses which have sales less than \$1 million.
- Support elimination or reduction of local inventory taxes. Texas is one of only six states that permit the levy of a property tax on inventories. This places the state at a severe economic disadvantage.
- Support authorizing a business's losses on the franchise (margin) tax to be carried forward for up to 10 years.
- Support an exemption from the franchise (margin) tax of all flow-through funds that are mandated by contract to be distributed to other entities.



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 continued efforts and funding to upgrade and improve State Hwy 77 to interstate standards from Corpus Christi to Brownsville as well as continued support for I-69.
- Support of a feasibility study and consideration of Brownsville as a destination point for AmTrak service and establishing a triangle of passenger rail service linking the city of Laredo, San Antonio and Brownsville.
- Secure permanent extension of the Overweight Truck Corridor and have the corridor designation transferred to the East Loop project, when finalized, to continue commercial and industrial truck traffic which is vital to the economy.
- Support the funding for the East Loop Project to include the south loop into the Port of Brownsville to facilitate traffic pertaining to the industrial sector.
- Support an increase in state provided public transportation funds. State funding needs to be increased to close that gap or Texas faces the possibility of losing federal transit operating funds that must be matched dollar for dollar.
- Support the funding for Phase II of the FM 511 expansion, which will be the future extension of I-69, or I-37 connecting to the Port of Brownsville, in turn, facilitating and fostering the commercial traffic of the region's industrial activity.
- Support and funding for the county's Rail Relocation Program, which develops the area's transportation projects that contribute to the economic success of the region through commercial cargo.
- 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 elimination of the Transit Tax from the State Sales Tax Cap. This will provide communities the opportunity to provide a local sales tax to fund local public transportation initiatives. Support for this effort would allow the development of additional sales tax capabilities to fund transit initiatives in the community.
- Oppose any effort to curtail or restrict navigation on the Gulf Intercoastal Waterway.



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:

- Support for construction of a 2.5 million galls per day (mgd) demonstration-scale seawater desalination plant and research facility at the Port of Brownsville. The facility will include the capability for continued testing of such desalination technologies as pretreatment, energy recovery, sustainable energy supply and larger, potentially more efficient, membranes.



**Grassroots Guide & Tips**



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 we 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.

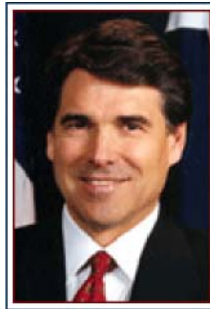
3. Know your audience.

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.



Governor **Rick Perry**



**CONTACT INFORMATION**

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State Senator **Eddie Lucio, Jr**  
- District 27



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State Rep **Rene O. Oliveira** -  
District 37



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State Rep. **Eddie Lucio, III**  
- District 38



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State Rep. **Tara Rios Ybarra**  
- District 43



**CONTACT INFORMATION**

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To be determined

**District Address:**

To be determined



### Cameron County Judge and County Commissioners

Official/Position	Address	Contact Info
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John Wood. County Commissioner, Pct. 2	1100 E. Monroe St., Brownsville, TX 78520	(v) 983-5091 jwood@co.cameron.tx.us
David Garza County Commissioner, Pct. 3	1390 West Expressway San Benito, TX 78586	(v) 361-8209 DAGarza@co.cameron.tx.us
Edna Tamayo County Commissioner, Pct. 4	201 N. T St. Harlingen, TX 78550	(v) 427-8069 ETmayo@co.cameron.tx.us



### City of Brownsville Mayor and City Commission

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