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## It is time to recognize the Rio Grande Valley as a rising borderland metropolis

Rodney Gomez

*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*

Luis Guajardo

Edna Ely-Ledesma

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## URBAN EDGE

# It is time to recognize the Rio Grande Valley as a rising borderland metropolis

PERSPECTIVES :

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RODNEY GOMEZ, LUIS GUAJARDO, EDNA ELY-LEDESMA



The Rio Grande Valley (RGV), or el Valle del Rio Bravo as it is known in Mexico, is often considered a far-flung collection of small-town border communities. As such, it remains largely unknown to the rest of the U.S., except when cited as one of the poorest areas in the country alongside Middle Appalachia or the Lower Mississippi Delta.

In 2020, it garnered national attention as one of the nation's hotspots for COVID-19, appearing across a variety of media like the [Washington Post](#) and [New York Times](#). Niche audiences might know about the RGV because of its prominence as the [hub of Texas citrus](#), namely the grapefruit, or being the homeplace of Tejano star [Freddy Fender](#), football icon [Tom Landry](#), or Mexican pop singer [Rigo Tovar](#).

The region has also made headlines more recently because of controversial placement of a SpaceX launch site in the Brownsville area, near the mouth of the Rio Grande River on the Gulf of Mexico. While public debate and questioning surrounding one-off projects like SpaceX is important, this article focuses on wider challenges and opportunities for the region's urbanization. First, we want to introduce the region to audiences who may be unfamiliar with the RGV's economic and demographic relevance in Texas. Second, we believe it is an opportune moment for RGV leaders to take a leap and shift its regional development trajectory — the physical, economic, and social aspects of urban growth — that will require closer direction and collaboration from sectors beyond government institutions. This includes an expanded set of regional groups from civil society, philanthropy, universities, and the private sector to be proactive in partnering with the public sector to shape a more resilient and equitable region.

## A preeminent urban area

When compared to other border conurbations, the RGV remains overlooked mainly because it lacks a large central city and because of how the Census Bureau classifies metropolitan statistical areas. However, the binational population clustered along the RGV includes an estimated 2.67 million people (1.29 million in USA and 1.38 million in Mexico), surpassing the El Paso-Juarez binational conurbation in total population. This makes the RGV the second-largest border conurbation with Mexico (only San Diego-Tijuana is bigger).

Within the RGV's American side, the largest city by population is Brownsville, on the far eastern edge of the valley, with a population of 182,230. But the RGV has two metropolitan statistical areas on the American side, per the Census' definition of an MSA: Brownsville-Harlingen-San Benito MSA and the McAllen-Edinburg-Mission MSA. The McAllen MSA on the western side is actually much more populated, at nearly 900,000 residents by a combination of numerous connected cities (McAllen, Mission, Edinburg, Pharr, San Juan, Alamo, Weslaco, and Mercedes, among others).

The population in the RGV is projected to nearly double by the year 2045 (from 1.3 million to 2.4 million on the U.S. side), driven by significant employment growth. Demographers and planners often point to the two MSA's in the RGV as separate, but they form one economic, social, and ecological region. Furthermore, a holistic view of the two MSAs should encompass nearby binational metros. The area's 2-hour proximity to Monterrey, Mexico (Mexico's second largest metro area and the country's NAFTA capital) has also been a significant boon to economic growth in South Texas.

For statewide audiences, the RGV's 2.67 million binational population puts it over both the San Antonio and Austin metropolitan areas, which have 2.59 million and 2.28 million people, respectively. And while those two metropolitan areas continue to surpass the RGV as regional economies, it is time the RGV recognized its full potential.

## In what ways has the region grown up?

The region has made strides on governance and collaboration recently. For instance, regional institutions have taken steps in the last decade to better respond to issues that transcend municipal boundaries. In 2013, the Texas Legislature created the University of Texas - Rio Grande Valley by consolidating the University of Texas - Pan American and University of Texas - Brownsville after several years of lobbying and organizing. This marked the first public university established by the State of Texas in the 21st century and included a public medical school in one of the country's highest need areas for healthcare. The University's founding represents a transformational accomplishment that will alter the health and economic well-being of the region for decades to come.

Similarly, in 2019 the area consolidated three of its metropolitan planning organizations (MPO's), responsible for overseeing and planning the region's federally-funded transportation infrastructure, into one regional MPO, known today as the Rio Grande Valley MPO. The goal is to better pool financial resources and more seamlessly plan transportation infrastructure across the region. The arrangement also helps regional transportation planners to more effectively advocate for transportation needs with the Texas Department of Transportation and U.S. Department of Transportation. The impact of this merger is too early to tell from a financial perspective, but it has united elected leaders against what used to be a fragmented governance structure that often pitted the three MPO's in direct competition for funds.

The history of development in the region tells us that its unique location and commitment to agriculture have been driving forces. The RGV, like most places situated along binational rivers, has strategic importance. Although Mexico is not now a military threat, the region was a site of skirmishes during the Mexican-American War (1846-1848).

Places like Brownsville's Fort Brown served as strategic posts during the American Civil War. A busy deepwater port near the mouth of the Rio Grande and South Padre Island, along with nearby coastland, have drawn investments from abroad, with SpaceX being the latest iteration.

The Valley's economy was, and continues to be, based on the export of crops such as citrus and sugar cane. In the early 1900's, the advent of railroad connections to northern markets and the widespread loss of cattle to drought brought settlers from the north who quickly seized on fertile land that had been owned by Mexican locals and set up networks of irrigation to grow their crops. In the twenty years before 1930, irrigated crop land owned primarily by Anglo emigrants ballooned from under 30,000 to over 400,000 acres.

The ensuing distribution of economic power continues today, with the most visible outward signs being the disproportionate number of towns, landmarks, and buildings named after Whites in a region that has a 90% Mexican-American composition.

## **RGV at a crossroads with SpaceX**

The region, particularly Brownsville, is at a crossroads that could transform the city and remake the regional economy. Over the past decade, the city has seen a resurgence of local leadership invested in place-based urban development strategies, exemplified by the growth of partnerships with the non-profit sector. This wave has served as a catalyst to creative placemaking and resurgence of city life, the growth of the farmers market, the community garden movement, the CycloBia, and the revitalization of the Downtown where new locally owned boutique dining and retail experiences have emerged. These local economic development strategies are supporting locally owned businesses and nurturing a new wave of pride for the city.

At the same time, SpaceX has emerged as a new player with influence over development priorities, one that is likely to command a greater role in the planning and development process to the detriment of local voices. South Texas carries the challenging legacy of the failed promises of NAFTA, where larger economic players displaced labor, which played a part in preventing the region from achieving more widespread economic regeneration. On the surface-level, Brownsville has seen a proliferation of space-themed businesses and is having a moment with all things space. More deeply, housing prices are increasing and outpacing the



growth in home sales prices when compared to the McAllen-area which was considered the economic powerhouse from NAFTA and witnessed more rapid population growth over the last 30 years.

While still an affordable community, these recent price increases point to future housing affordability challenges that need to be confronted in the near-term. For example, the ratio of median home sales prices to median household income for Brownsville still sits well below the national and state figures, but recent growth suggests the region could easily meet or surpass those levels if incomes do not rise as quickly as home prices. (For context, the highest sales price ratios in the country are around 7.0 and tend to be clustered on the West Coast.)

From a planning perspective, SpaceX prompts questions that tie into broader urbanization debates: 1) what are the potential environmental risks of setting up a space exploration launching site in an environmentally protected area for economic gain; 2) will high tech jobs be recruited locally or imported from outside the region, 3) are there strategies in place to train new workers, and 4) what efforts will the region invest in to develop holistic approaches that look at housing, education, community development, and transportation together?

## **RGV demands deeper attention, collaboration**

The dynamism of the binational communities clustered along the U.S.- Mexico border along with the outsized influence of SpaceX in South Texas signals that the area is also primed for deeper and sustained study to be able to confront these urban challenges.

The region is vastly understudied, particularly by disciplines that understand the built environment and their ensuing economic and social outcomes—city planning, landscape architecture, geography, sociology, public policy, and civil engineering.

Expanded urban research can inform policymaking and action by local leaders. It can also develop the resources and relationships necessary to confront regional challenges, including assistance in building local data repositories, producing regular reports, diagnosing systemic

barriers, and convening conversations among public and private stakeholders around solutions.

We write this article as three urban planning researchers and practitioners who grew up in the RGV and dedicate our careers to studying cities and the institutions that shape urban growth. We believe there are opportunities on the horizon with the burgeoning university system at UTRGV as a hub in confronting issues of the built environment (e.g. integrating transportation, housing, land use), confronting urban inequality/economic mobility, and adapting/mitigating to the unequal effects of climate change (particularly extreme heat).

A critical first step is to establish a robust foundation, with data, technical resources, research, and interactive tools, that allow all partners to engage equitably in such a process. The university system is well-positioned to be a leader in this arena and already has a track-record of convening regional leaders on issues that transcend political boundaries. They also already house various disciplines which could be brought together in a research center as a multidisciplinary team of urban practitioners and researchers.

Like everywhere else in the US, government leads the planning effort in RGV, but it's time to expand into a multi-sector approach brings about partnership and innovation to confront issues that can often overwhelm governmental entities. This approach can be the difference between communities that simply check off the boxes and perpetuate status quo development patterns and those that take the reins and shape the future they want.

*The views expressed in this post are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research.*

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**Rodney Gomez** serves as Executive Director of Parking and Transportation at the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley, where he chaired the planning region's transit/human services advisory committee. He also served as Poet Laureate of McAllen, Texas, and is a board



*member of NewFound, a nonprofit publisher based in Austin. He lives with his wife and daughter in McAllen.*

**Luis Guajardo** *is a certified urban planner and an urban policy research manager at the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University. Luis was raised in Mission, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley, where he had the opportunity to live a binational life near his family in Monterrey, Mexico.*

**Edna Ely-Ledesma** *is an assistant professor in the Department of Planning and Landscape Architecture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is also the director of the Kaufman Lab for the Study and Design of Food Systems and Marketplaces. She focuses on understanding the development of smart, green, and just 21st century cities. She is a native of Brownsville, Texas.*

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