



Laredo Binational Collaboration Program: Creating Partnerships for Progress

Introduction and Objectives

The Laredo Binational Collaboration Program (LBCP) is a strategic initiative aimed at enhancing cooperation and mutual benefit between the City of Laredo and different regions in Mexico. This program seeks to address shared challenges and opportunities across various sectors, fostering a robust and resilient partnership. By focusing on economic growth, cultural exchange, environmental sustainability, public health, and governance the LBCP aims to build a deeper and more integrated relationship between the two entities.

The LBCP includes 3 different levels of collaboration, local, state and federal. Each of the components described below can be applied at each level to increase the engagement and strengthen the partnership with the entity or agency.

Background

Sister Cities International was created at President Eisenhower's 1956 White House summit on citizen diplomacy, where he envisioned a network that would be a champion for peace and prosperity by fostering bonds between people from different communities around the world. A sister city, county, or state relationship is a broad-based, long-term partnership between two communities in two countries. A relationship is officially recognized after the highest elected or appointed official from both communities sign off on an agreement to become sister cities.³

The program was implemented in Laredo in 1984 with the agreement between the City of Laredo and Murray Bridge, Australia and in November of 1986 with Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas.

Binational cooperation between communities from the US and Mexico "is largely based on specific areas of interaction such as cuisine, art, and culture; economic ties; shared educational resources; health and medical care; environment; criminal justice; transportation and border crossings; urban services; and familial and friendship bonds. What is generally missing from these cooperative efforts is the institutionalization of the activities."²

The Laredo Binational Collaboration Program seeks to establish a more defined process for collaboration between Laredo, Texas and the different municipalities, states and agencies in Mexico.

Program Components

1. Local Level – Municipalities

1.1 Dos Laredos Unity Program: Strengthening the Connection Between Laredo and Nuevo Laredo (Appendix B)

1.2 Programs with Individual Municipalities outside of the Dos Laredos Region

1.2.1 Economic Development and Trade

- Joint Economic Development Initiatives: Laredo can collaborate with Mexican municipalities to create joint business initiatives focusing on local sectors like manufacturing and agriculture that can, in turn bring more business to the Port. Strengthening Laredo's presence and relationship building in international markets to facilitate business and economic growth.
- Promotion and attraction for economic development through international trade targeting key industries and involving the Port Laredo Core Departments. Reach new markets to assess competitive landscapes and increase presence in foreign markets.
- Binational Business Incubators: Establish incubators that support startups from both sides, fostering innovation and job creation.
- Trade and Investment Forums: Organize regular forums for local businesses to discuss trade opportunities, regulatory environments, and best practices. To serve as a platform for government officials, business leaders and industry associations aimed at promoting Port Laredo and conduct round table discussions aimed at developing actionable strategies to stimulate economic development between both regions. This event will follow a bilateral structure to be hosted in both countries.
- Port Laredo Promotion: Enhance marketing efforts to promote Port Laredo as a vital trade hub, highlighting its strategic location. By identifying the main industry of the Mexican municipalities, we can customize the products we promote. As part of the agreements with the different municipalities we can participate in events, meetings, trade-shows to promote services of Port Laredo.
- Trade Missions: Coordinate trade missions where local business leaders can meet counterparts in Mexico, exploring new markets. This effort would also include meetings with local governments to identify joint business opportunities. Public-Private Participation: By fostering collaboration between public and private sector, trade missions can be more effective in achieving goals of enhancing international trade and facilitate economic growth by amplifying B2B opportunities.

1.2.2 Cultural, Tourism and Educational Exchange

- Cultural Festivals and Events: Organize joint festivals that celebrate the shared culture of Laredo and Mexico, promoting local artisans and food. Enhance the offerings of the current Laredo International Sister Cities Festival. Identify local events where Visit Laredo can have a presence. Organize regular cultural exchange programs, such as art exhibitions, music

festivals and culinary events, alternating between Laredo and the communities participating in the program.

- Digital Cultural Platforms: Create platforms showcasing local artists and cultural events to enhance awareness and engagement.
- Tourism Promotion: Collaborate on joint marketing campaigns to attract tourists to both Laredo and the different Mexican communities.
- Educational Exchange Programs: Partner with local schools to establish exchange programs that enhance language skills and cultural understanding. Partner with schools, universities, and cultural institutions to create student exchange programs, joint research projects, or educational seminars that foster mutual understanding and collaboration.

1.2.3 Infrastructure and Community Projects

- Identify opportunities for shared infrastructure and community projects: These can include, cross-border transportation improvements or joint environmental sustainability initiatives.
- Best Practices on Infrastructure Management: Share management practices between cities to enhance efficiency.
- Opportunities for Donations or Purchasing of Equipment: Facilitate community efforts to acquire shared resources for mutual benefit. (Appendix A)

1.2.4 Public Safety

- Police Department Best Practices for Public Safety: Protocols for cross-border crime prevention and response. Share management practices between police departments to enhance efficiency.
- Fire Department Training Opportunities: Coordinate training sessions between departments to improve emergency response capabilities. Identify the different trainings (virtual and in-person) that can be offered.

1.2.5 Public Health and Environmental Sustainability

1.2.6 Governance and Community Engagement

- Establish regular dialogue between municipal governments, including annual or biannual meetings to discuss shared goals, challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.
- Establish an action plan and timeline
- Form a binational steering committee with representatives from both governments to oversee the program's implementation, monitor progress, and address challenges.
- Form binational subcommittees that will implement the different programs
- Volunteer and Civic Engagement: Promote international volunteer programs and civic engagement activities to foster grassroots connections and mutual understanding between communities. Encourage local NGOs, community groups, and volunteer organizations from both communities to engage in joint activities, such as community service projects or advocacy campaigns. Host volunteer exchange programs where citizens can participate in community-building activities in each other's cities.

2. State Level

2.1.1 Economic Development and Trade

- Joint Economic Development Initiatives: Partner with state governments to create broader economic policies that facilitate cross-border commerce. Become members of state and regional associations focused on economic development, international trade, industry clusters, etc.
- Trade and Investment Forums: Facilitate state-led trade conferences and/or forums to attract larger investors interested in binational projects.
- Port Laredo Promotion: Work with state officials to promote infrastructure investments that support the port's growth. Identify opportunities of promotion at State level events and trade-shows
- Trade Missions: State-led missions to Mexico can target larger industry sectors such as automotive, aerospace, technology and agricultural (produce).

2.1.2 Cultural, Tourism and Educational Exchange

- Cultural Festivals and Events: Support larger regional festivals that include broader Laredo-Mexico cultural themes. Create opportunities for art exhibits that showcase the artisan products and artwork from the Mexican States. Establish a store in Laredo that can showcase the different artisan products made in each state.

2.1.3 Infrastructure and Community Projects

- Shared Infrastructure projects: Collaborate on state-funded projects that enhance connectivity between Texas and Mexico.

2.1.4 Public Safety

- Police Department Best Practices for Public Safety
- Fire Department Training Opportunities: Develop state policies that promote shared training programs and safety resources.
- Share upcoming projects that affect both regions to ensure Laredo is prepared to support the new challenges that new projects/industries may bring

2.1.5 Public Health and Environmental Sustainability

2.1.6 Governance and Community Engagement

- Establish and action plan and timeline
- Form a binational steering committee with representatives from both governments to oversee the program's implementation, monitor progress, and address challenges.
- Form binational subcommittees that will implement the different programs

3. Federal Level

3.1.1 Economic Development and Trade

- Joint Economic Development Initiatives: Collaborate on national policies that enhance trade agreements and tariffs affecting binational business. Utilize the services of our current lobbyists to create opportunities for meaningful conversations.
- Trade Missions: Establish a Mexico Legislative trip, identifying the agencies and elected officials that can influence the programs that will help advance public policy affecting the border.

3.1.2 Cultural, Tourism and Educational Exchange

- Cultural Festivals and Events: Promote binational cultural heritage at the national level through grants for cultural exchange programs.
- Educational Exchange Programs: Look for opportunities of federal funding in both the United States and Mexico for educational programs that foster cross-border partnerships between universities.

3.1.3 Infrastructure and Community Projects

- Shared Infrastructure projects: Secure federal funding in both Washington and Mexico City for large-scale infrastructure projects like bridges and highways connecting Laredo and Mexico.

3.1.4 Public Safety

- Police Department Best Practices for Public Safety
- Fire Department Training Opportunities

3.1.5 Public Health and Environmental Sustainability

3.1.6 Governance and Community Engagement

Stakeholders

1. Local Government Officials:

- Mayor and City Council Members: Discuss shared governance priorities, municipal policies, and potential collaborations in public services, economic development, tourism, and infrastructure projects. Build relationships to align long-term strategic goals.
- Economic Development Departments: Explore opportunities for trade, investment, and business collaboration, such as joint trade fairs, business delegations, and shared marketing campaigns to promote both cities as interconnected economic hubs.
- Public Safety and Health Officials: Discuss cross-border safety and health initiatives, such as emergency preparedness, health surveillance, and cooperative efforts to manage shared public health concerns or environmental issues.

2. Local Business and Economic Leaders:

- Chambers of Commerce and Business Associations: Engage in discussions on enhancing trade relationships, reducing cross-border trade barriers, and developing joint economic development programs.
- Key Industry Leaders and Entrepreneurs: Meet with leaders in key sectors such as manufacturing, logistics, tourism, and technology to explore potential partnerships, investments, and business ventures. Discuss ways to support local businesses in expanding to each other's markets.

3. Educational Institutions:

- University Presidents, School Administrators, and Professors: Discuss opportunities for academic exchange programs, collaborative research projects, and student exchange programs to foster mutual understanding and strengthen ties between educational institutions.
- Vocational and Technical Schools: Explore partnerships for workforce development programs, skills training, and certifications in high-demand areas, benefiting both cities.

4. Cultural Organizations and Artists:

- Local Cultural Organizations and Arts Councils: Engage with cultural leaders to plan joint cultural events, festivals, and exhibitions that promote shared heritage and foster cross-cultural understanding.
- Artists and Performers: Meet local artists, musicians, and performers to explore collaborative projects or cultural exchanges that could bring greater visibility to both cities' artistic communities.

5. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Groups:

- Local NGOs and Community Groups: Discuss shared social and environmental challenges, such as poverty, climate change, and public health, and explore opportunities for joint community service projects, advocacy, or capacity-building programs.
- Youth Organizations and Leaders: Engage with youth organizations to encourage the next generation to participate in LBCP activities and promote intercultural understanding.

6. Tourism Boards and Hospitality Industry:

- Tourism Boards and Agencies: Develop joint strategies for promoting tourism between both cities, including cultural, historical, and natural attractions. Discuss joint marketing campaigns and the development of tourism packages that highlight the unique experiences offered by both cities.
- Hotel, Restaurant, and Travel Operators: Meet with key players in the hospitality and tourism sector to discuss collaborative efforts to attract visitors and improve tourism infrastructure.

7. Public Health and Environmental Organizations:

- Public Health Officials: Collaborate on public health initiatives, such as disease prevention, vaccination campaigns, and emergency preparedness for cross-border health threats.
- Environmental Groups: Explore joint efforts to address environmental concerns like air and water quality, waste management, and sustainable development projects.

8. Community and Faith Leaders:

- Community and Faith-Based Leaders: Meet with influential community leaders to understand local priorities, promote goodwill, and foster grassroots engagement in sister city initiatives.

9. Media Outlets:

- Local Journalists and Media Organizations: Engage with local media to share the purpose and goals of relationship under the LBCP. Ensure transparent communication and promote positive coverage of joint initiatives.

Implementation Strategy

1. Governance and Oversight

- Establish guidelines for the creation of agreements and collaborative projects
- Current Sister Cities and State Agreements
 - Sister Cities Agreements – All active agreements will be grandfathered into the new program. Any potential new agreements will now be under the Laredo Binational Collaboration Program. The objectives and current projects will be reviewed and a new plan will be developed in accordance to the LBCP
 - Current State Agreements will be grandfathered into the new program, the objectives and current projects will be reviewed and a new plan will be developed in accordance to the LBCP
- Establish Binational Committees for the each one of the agreements and create Subcommittees for each program component under the agreement.

2. Funding and Resources

- As part of the creation of each agreement the Steering Committee should identify the funding sources for each program component.
- Each community should allocate the necessary resources to complete the programs and projects.
- Seek funding through government grants, international development funds, public-private partnerships, and community fundraising.

3. Communication and Outreach

- Marketing and Promotion

- Develop a public awareness campaign in both Laredo and the regions participating in the program to educate elected officials, citizens, and businesses of the benefits of participating in the LBCP and the opportunities to get involved.
- Implement a comprehensive marketing strategy to promote program activities and achievements through traditional and digital media channels. Utilize the current digital platforms and social media channels that the City and Visit Laredo have to share news, events, and initiatives related to the program.
- Creation of a landing page in the City of Laredo or Visit Laredo Website, including the guidelines to participate in the program and success stories of past projects.
- Public Relations
 - Through the Public Information Office and/or each Department's PIOs share information about the ongoing projects. Engage with media outlets to raise awareness of the program's goals and successes, ensuring transparent and positive coverage. Highlight success stories and tangible outcomes from past collaborations to build momentum and encourage further participation.
- Training and Education
 - Use digital tools to host virtual forums, town hall meetings, or webinars on topics of mutual interest, enabling broader participation.

4. Monitoring and Evaluation

- Performance Metrics: Establish key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure the impact and effectiveness of each program component.
- Feedback Mechanisms: Create channels for feedback from stakeholders and participants to continuously improve program activities and address emerging needs.

Expected Outcomes

1. Strengthened Economic Ties
2. Enhanced Cultural Understanding
3. Better Public Health and Safety
4. Greater Community Engagement

By implementing these strategies, the Binational Collaboration Program aims to create a more integrated, cooperative, and prosperous relationship between Laredo and the different regions in Mexico, benefiting both nations and their citizens. It also creates a pathway for collaboration beyond a Sister Cities Agreement.

Appendix A

Equipment Donation Process

A city does not need a Sister Cities Agreement to receive a donation.

The Laredo Convention & Visitors Bureau manages the process for international donations with the authorization of Management and the approval from City Council.

For donations to Mexican municipalities

As per the Mexican State Department, the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE), the entities that can receive charitable donations are:

- Federal, State and Municipal Governments,
- Authorized agencies of each level of government,
- Non-tax payer organizations with authorization to receive contributions. Must be registered at Mexican Customs Authority.

According to foreign trade rules, all charitable donations received in Mexico, originated in different countries, may be benefited by tax exemption, if those are destined the following purposes: Culture, Teaching, Research, Public health, Social service.

It is convenient than both, donors and receiving entities, follow the rules and regulations enforced by the Mexican Customs Authority (Sistema de Administración Tributaria SAT) regarding charitable donations.

Steps

1. The City of Laredo receives the requests from different municipalities (with or without agreements) for the donation of equipment, from vehicles to office equipment.

The City of Laredo first priority is to its neighboring communities, after that preference is given to communities with active Sister Cities Agreements; with Management's authorization we contact the different department to confirm availability of equipment that could be donated. All equipment considered for donation should:

- Not be in use by the department
- Already have been through the auction process
- Already be depreciated and have a book value of zero (0)
- Come from funds that allow donations

The City of Laredo donates the equipment as is and does not assume any liability associated with the use after they have been transferred.

2. Once the equipment for the potential donation is identified an item is presented to the City Council for approval, including: Municipality receiving the donation, unit number and description, what purpose will the equipment serve, fund source and book value (should equal zero).

3. If the donation is approved by City Council
 - a. A letter goes out to the municipality advising them of the approval with the same information that was included in the Council agenda.
 - b. The Department from which the equipment is being donated is also advised of the approval.
 - c. In case of vehicle donations, the Fleet Department is also advised so they can request the signature from Management on the vehicle titles.
4. The equipment is donated as is and the receiving municipality should:
 - a. Assign a person that will pick up the equipment and provide their contact information (a matching ID is required to pick up the equipment)
 - b. Pick up the equipment at its current location
 - c. Make any necessary repairs or provide any additional vehicles and/or equipment to transport the donation to their municipality.
 - d. Make the necessary arrangements with a customs broker and with their country's customs authorities

Appendix B

Dos Laredos Unity Program: Strengthening the Connection Between Laredo and Nuevo Laredo

Joseph W. Neeb, Laredo City Manager
September 11, 2024

Introduction and Objectives

The **Dos Laredos Unity Program: Bound by Community, Bridged by Partnership** is a new initiative aimed at strengthening the unique relationship between Laredo, Texas, and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, by placing a greater focus on the people of both cities. This program builds on existing efforts, such as the binational riverfront project, but goes further by emphasizing cultural exchange, economic collaboration, community engagement, and shared public services.

While the riverfront project has centered around the physical geography of the river that separates our two cities, the Dos Laredos Unity Program aims to connect our communities beyond a single landmark. By placing the emphasis on the people rather than just the river, we create a stronger, more resilient partnership that will bring lasting benefits to both sides of the border.

Program Components and Benefits

The Dos Laredos Unity Program is designed to foster a deeper, more meaningful connection between our cities by focusing on several key areas:

1. Enhancing Cross-Border Relations: The program will promote opportunities for genuine connection and cooperation between the residents of Laredo and Nuevo Laredo. This includes organizing joint cultural events, such as festivals, art exhibitions, and music concerts, that celebrate the shared heritage of both communities. Additionally, the program will facilitate youth exchanges and educational collaborations, allowing students from both cities to learn from one another and build lifelong friendships. By focusing on the people, we create a sense of shared identity and belonging, which is crucial for fostering long-term cross-border relations.

2. Stimulating Mutual Economic Growth: Economic collaboration is another cornerstone of the Dos Laredos Unity Program. Recognizing that both cities stand to benefit from a more integrated economic strategy, the program proposes the creation of a binational business incubator and innovation hub. This facility will provide resources such as mentoring, co-working spaces, and training to support startups and small businesses on both sides of the border. By fostering cross-border partnerships and joint ventures, we can stimulate economic growth, create jobs, and attract new investments. The program will also include coordinated efforts to promote tourism, marketing the two cities as a single destination to both domestic and international visitors.

3. Improving Public Engagement and Involvement: The Dos Laredos Unity Program seeks to deepen public engagement by involving citizens directly in decision-making processes. This will be achieved by

creating opportunities for dialogue between community groups, local businesses, and government entities. For example, citizens will be invited to participate in public forums and workshops where they can share their views and ideas on various cross-border initiatives. By empowering our communities and encouraging active participation, we build trust and collaboration beyond governmental levels, ensuring that the program reflects the needs and aspirations of our residents.

4. Sustaining Partnership Beyond the Riverfront: While the river remains an essential part of the shared geography and culture of Laredo and Nuevo Laredo, the Dos Laredos Unity Program aims to expand the focus beyond this single element. The program proposes a more comprehensive, community-driven approach that encompasses a wide range of sectors, from public safety and health to education and environmental sustainability. By emphasizing the people, we create a partnership that is not confined to the riverfront but extends across the entire spectrum of our shared interests and challenges. This broader focus allows us to build a more dynamic and adaptable relationship, capable of evolving with the changing needs of both cities.

Implementation Strategy

To implement the Dos Laredos Unity Program effectively, we propose establishing a Binational Steering Committee that includes representatives from both cities. This committee will oversee the program's development and execution, ensuring that it remains aligned with the interests and priorities of both communities. Subcommittees will be formed to focus on specific areas, such as economic development, utilities and infrastructure, public safety, and cultural exchange, to coordinate efforts and maximize impact.

Regular meetings and an annual Binational Forum will provide a platform for ongoing communication and collaboration between the two cities. These meetings will help address challenges, share progress, and adjust strategies as needed to keep the program on track.

To fund the various initiatives under the program, we propose exploring diverse funding sources, including grants, public-private partnerships, and community-driven fundraising efforts. A cost-sharing model will be developed to ensure that both cities contribute fairly to the program's expenses while also benefiting equally from its outcomes.