Thank you so much for that warm welcome. It’s good to be here with so many friends from the border, the front door of Texas, and a region that represents our future. I am always glad to listen to your concerns and I value your advice about the unique challenges facing the border. In fact, I have for many years placed a great deal of trust in the advice of one border native, Buddy Garcia, who was my top adviser on border affairs for three years before I appointed him assistant secretary of state last month. I place the same high-level of confidence in another South Texan, a Carrizo Springs native, my new campaign director Luis Saenz.

Both of these men are doing outstanding work, and I am fortunate to have them on my team. This meeting is important for the future of Texas. Since 1998, the work of the Texas Border Infrastructure Coalition has helped influence the legislative process. You have helped Texas leaders gain a more complete perspective as we formulate public policy designed to benefit all parts of the state. And you have proved that when we work together, we get things done, as last year’s battle on medical malpractice reform clearly demonstrates.

Today, because the people of the Rio Grande Valley gave Proposition 12 the margin of victory it needed, liability insurance rates are dropping for many doctors, hospital premiums are down 17 percent, frivolous lawsuits against medical providers have declined dramatically, and most importantly, patients have greater access to the care they need. Doctors are now opening their practices in medically underserved regions, doctors like Danielle Flores, an obstetrician who recently moved to McAllen to start delivering babies, in part because of medical malpractice reform. She is just one of hundreds of doctors across Texas that are reopening or expanding their practices because they have greater confidence that our legal system will protect them from frivolous lawsuits, and that is a direct result of the hard work of Valley leaders and citizens.

Just as we worked together to protect the practice of medicine, we must work together to provide more jobs and opportunity for border citizens. Good jobs can lift working families out of poverty, renew their hope in the American Dream, and expand the horizons of opportunity for their children. There are a number of key components to attracting quality jobs: a good education system, a skilled workforce, and a tax and regulatory climate that welcomes entrepreneurs instead of turning them away. That’s why earlier this week I asked the legislature to authorize $300 million for the Texas Enterprise Fund, so we can build a better Texas one job at a time, or in some cases, thousands of jobs at a time.
Since we created the Enterprise Fund 18 months ago, it has helped Texas close deals with employers that will create more than 22,000 new jobs and pump $6 billion into our economy. Just yesterday, in fact, we announced the largest job creation project in the United States for the past four years, an expansion by Countrywide Financial that will bring 7,500 new jobs to Texas by 2011. Like all of you, I want the border to share more directly in the Enterprise Fund’s success in creating jobs.

That’s why we came to the table with the second largest offer yet to date for a Valley prospect, $45 million for Boeing. Of course, it’s hard to compete when another state virtually gives up the farm to keep their leading employer, as did Washington State. But my promise to you is this: if you keep bringing us viable prospects, we’ll do everything we can to close the deal. I also believe border communities should band together to help pass a new $300 million Emerging Technology Fund that I proposed earlier this week which will focus on fostering innovation in emerging high-tech industries and accelerate the commercialization of new products from the lab to the marketplace.

I have proposed that half of these funds be used to encourage the private sector to collaborate with institutions of higher learning to develop Regional Centers of Innovation and Commercialization, and I hope one of these new centers can be established in the Rio Grande Valley. The new Regional Centers of Innovation and Commercialization will become hotbeds of research and development activities, will incubate start-up firms, will lure existing companies that can commercialize their developments, and provide workforce training for employees in the area.

As all of us in this room know, economic development is inextricably linked to workforce development. Without a skilled workforce, we will never be able to attract the jobs of tomorrow. I have heard your concerns expressed about workforce training in this state, and taken them to heart. In fact, today I want to announce that one of my legislative priorities will be to double funding for the skills development fund, making an additional $25 million available for job training across Texas. These funds will give workers the skills they need to access the opportunities of the future.

This is so important to the Rio Grande Valley that I not only want to expand the pot of money available for job training, I have asked the Workforce Commission, and they have agreed, to provide a new $500,000 grant from the skills development fund to TSTC in Harlingen. This grant will be used to custom train workers for 96 new jobs and 354 existing jobs, serving 15 small and medium-sized employers in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Upon completion of this training, workers will be making more than $11.50 per hour.

Now, whoever said good news comes in “threes” may have had this speech in mind, because there is one other tidbit of good news I want to share: today I am directing that $482,000 in discretionary funds from the Workforce Investment Act be provided to TSTC in Harlingen to develop an advanced manufacturing and integrated systems technology training and employment program. These funds, which will soon be matched by the Department of Labor, will allow TSTC to train workers for state-of-the-art manufacturing jobs. Job training is a critical component to economic revival, especially in areas of our state with higher rates of unemployment. You have my commitment to increasing funding for job training so that we can expand opportunity for our people.

One key component to the long-term health of our economy is a world class transportation system. Along the border, normal transportation challenges posed by a rapidly expanding population are compounded by heavy cross-border traffic as a result of NAFTA. Some border communities, such as Brownsville, are coming up with innovative solutions to transportation challenges. Cameron County recently formed a regional mobility authority to relocate a rail line away from downtown, and used the old railroad right of way to construct a new highway. Not only will traffic congestion decrease, but hazardous freight will be moved further away from the population. I would like for the Brownsville rail relocation to serve as a model in the years to come for other freight rail relocation projects along the border. Simply put, it will make our border communities safer when freight rail is diverted outside of congested areas.
As governor, I have made transportation a primary focus. I joined with border representatives and senators, like Eddie Lucio, in creating the new colonia road program. Though life in a colonia can be a hardship, we're trying to make it easier for the children of colonias to reach school, and emergency vehicles to reach residents with quality roads. Earlier this year, I was proud to request an additional $50 million in bond funding to build more colonia roads, and border communities have responded once again with proposed projects to be considered by the Texas Department of Transportation. TxDOT is a strong partner in the effort to build a better Texas.

In the Statewide Mobility Plan for 2004 through 2007, TxDOT has respectively ranked the Pharr, El Paso and Laredo districts as 7th, 9th and 10th out of 25 districts in terms of funding. And TxDOT just committed $400 million in bond proceeds to accelerate critically needed border highway projects. While improving and expanding the current system is important, we can't lose sight of a long-term vision. That's why I have proposed the Trans Texas Corridor.

Some thought the Trans Texas Corridor was a pie-in-the-sky idea that would never see the light of day. But tomorrow, the first contract will be awarded for the building of major segments that can relieve congestion, remove hazardous cargo from city centers, provide greater economic opportunity, and allow for the movement of critical commodities like water, oil and gas, and electric utilities. The eyes of the world will be on Texas tomorrow, and we won't disappoint in showing the leadership needed to address growth, pollution and congestion.

Leadership in transportation involves more than expanding existing highways that are already overcrowded, it means addressing the growth challenges of tomorrow before they turn into tremendous problems that cost commuters time and employers money. Our friends that live south of the Rio Grande River have embraced this vision for better transportation. They know that it will improve the flow of commerce and the sharing of resources. And it will further integrate our economies.

I have long believed that Texas and Mexico are not only linked by culture and common roots, we share one future. The border region is the epicenter of that convergence of cultures and economies. When the border prospers, Texas prospers. May we never lose sight of the long-term vision, which is to create jobs, opportunity and prosperity from Brownsville to El Paso, and everywhere in between.

Thank you, may God bless you, and may God bless Texas.