Thank you, Mayor Wardy. It is an honor to be here with so many leaders from the great city of El Paso, the front door of Texas, and a place that represents our future. You are wise to band together to advocate for the needs of the people of El Paso, and you are fortunate to be joined in your efforts by a great legislative team. They are doing a tremendous job representing the views and values of El Paso in the state capitol.

I always appreciate the opportunity to listen to your concerns and advice about the unique challenge facing your region of the state. In fact, some of the best advice I get comes from men and women from El Paso that I have appointed to important state commissions and boards, including the Texas Transportation Commission, the Military Preparedness Commission, and the Small Business Incubator Board. Along with your elected representatives in the legislature, these individuals have given El Paso perhaps the more powerful voice it has ever had in Austin. Like all of you here today, I want El Paso to experience greater opportunity for this generation and every generation to come, and in this session of the legislature, we can take an important step towards that goal by making wise investments in good jobs and great schools.

Creating opportunity means we must redouble our efforts to create jobs in every part of the state. 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. I am proud to be governor of a state that is setting an example to the rest of the nation when it comes to job creation. Since September of 2003, Texas employers have added 162,000 new jobs. In 2003, we landed 9 of the 24 largest capital investments in the nation. Sales tax collections are up and most economic indicators point to sustained growth in the future. There are a number of key components to attracting quality jobs: a good education system, a friendly tax and regulatory climate, and a workforce that has the skills employers need. That’s why I want to double funding for the Skills Development Fund, because economic development and workforce development go hand in hand. Without a skilled workforce, we will never be able to attract the jobs of tomorrow.

I am committed to workforce training because it is an important part of economic revival, especially in parts of our state that have higher rates of unemployment. With an additional $25 million for job training across Texas, we can give more workers the skills they need to access the opportunities of the future. An increased investment in a skilled workforce will help Texas keep the economic momentum we have built in recent years and expand opportunity for all our people. We’ve also established a new economic development field office in El Paso to help local business leaders identify job creation opportunities. And I am particularly proud of the work we have done to support some of the most valuable employees in El Paso, the troops stationed at Fort Bliss.
Last year, Texas committed $16.2 million to improve transportation infrastructure around the base so that our soldiers have quicker and easier access to their airfield, and civilians don't have to wait in traffic while military vehicles cross a major road. Not only will this project support the 3,600 new soldiers and civilians who will call El Paso home in 2006, it will place Fort Bliss in a stronger position in the Base Realignment and Closure process. When it comes to BRAC, I want to do everything we can to keep our bases providing security for America, as well as economic security for the families whose livelihoods depend on them. That's why I support giving defense communities the authority to invest local sales tax revenue in projects to improve their local military installations. Empowering local leaders to use so-called 4A-4B funds to invest in base improvement projects is important to retaining our bases and the jobs associated on them.

Just as important as our efforts to promote long-term health of our economy are our efforts to promote the health of our people. In El Paso and the entire border region, I know access to quality and affordable health care is a top concern. That's why we passed the most sweeping lawsuit abuse reforms in the nation in 2003. These reforms, endorsed by a majority of voters across the state, and nearly 60 percent of voters in El Paso County, are healing the practice of medicine in Texas and giving patients greater access to needed care, especially in medically underserved regions like the border.

We have also focused efforts on increasing immunization rates along the border. In 2001, we provided $6.6 million to immunize more children in the border region, and in 2003 I signed an executive order giving the Texas Department of Health the authority to speed implementation of a comprehensive plan to increase child immunizations. Those initiatives helped bring immunization rates for young Texas children to an all-time high in 2004, up 9.5 percent from the previous year.

But perhaps the most important investment we can make in a healthier border region is to fully fund Texas Tech Medical School in El Paso. In 2003, I was proud to use my veto pen on other budget items to secure $2 million in start up funds for the medical school, and to help provide $45 million in tuition revenue bonds to keep the school moving forward. This year, it is time for the legislature to provide the funding source needed to make the school a long-term success. Its mission is worthy, the community is deserving, and fully funding the Texas Tech Medical School in this legislative session is simply the right thing to do.

Throughout my twenty years in public service, I have never been more optimistic about our future. Today, I see a bright future ahead for El Paso and all of Texas, a future full of opportunity if we make wise investments in this session of the legislature. As we roll up our sleeves, I want you to know that my door is open to the leaders here today and all who come in good faith to build a better Texas.

Thank you, and God bless you.