

A conversation with Julian Alvarez – President and CEO of Rio Grande Valley Partnership

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Sporting his classy looks and signature cowboy boots engraved with the seal of the State of Texas, Julian welcomes us into his office in Weslaco, Texas. Since assuming the presidency of this organization in February, Julian has been dedicated to fulfilling its goals for better highways, increased educational opportunities, better jobs and legislation to benefit the Rio Grande Valley without forgetting the importance of the international relations with Mexico.

RGVision Contributors: What is the most important aspect of the Valley Partnership when it comes to communicating with state and federal agencies?

Julian Alvarez: We focus on international trade and commerce. What we do is a collective effort, and because of our rapport with the people in Washington DC and in Austin, Texas, they know that a big part of our industry is the Mexican shoppers. We've got a lot of trade that goes through Mexico into the US in this area, and we want the Mexican public to know that we are here to assist them.

RGVision: Any specific objectives related to commerce between the two areas?

Alvarez: To increase the number of commercial and pedestrian traffic. That means supporting the need for more custom agents or more border patrolmen or infrastructure dollars to widen our bridges. Our intentions are to help expedite traffic between Mexico and the United States.

RGVision: Why is supporting the I-69 project important for this area?

Alvarez: When a company is interested in investing in the United States, the first thing they want to know is if there is an inter-state in the area, it is an “eye-catcher,” and so are the ports of entry.

RGVision: Do you foresee a problem with the people who come to shop if the dollar increases its value?

Alvarez: We have the lowest cost of living in the US, so I don't think it directly affects the people of Mexico as it would if they were living in Detroit or Houston. Food is inexpensive here, tuition is affordable. Everything is growing here, and because the cost of living is so low it allows the people of Mexico to come and shop here.

RGVision: What challenges do Mexican investors present for the region?

Alvarez: The only challenge that I can think of is to be able to accommodate the needs that they have. Do we have the workforce in place so they can open their factories in the US? I will say that's not a problem, but I'm sure they look into this. The economic impact is not only to the valley but to all of Texas. Prominent people from Mexico are moving to the Valley, to San Antonio, Houston, and Dallas. They want to move to SA and Houston because they can fly back and forth very cheaply. The Partnership works closely with all valley airports to lure more visitors here.

RGVision: Why is it important for these investors to be part of the Partnership?



Alvarez: We represent the business community of the valley. Everyone who is a member of our regional chamber is actively involved with what is happening here. The Partnership was developed back in 1944 by Lloyd Bentsen Sr., a businessman from Mission, Texas. He had a vision that we needed to be more proactive, and the only way to do that was to go to Washington DC. So here is what I would tell the people of Mexico: that the Partnership is actively involved in the daily operations of local businesses, security aspects, infrastructure and transportation needs, we deal with all facets of what happens here.

RGVision: Your predecessor, Bill Summers was known and respected all over northern of Mexico, how do you feel about...

Alvarez: Walking in his steps? I know that following in Bill Summers steps is not going to be easy, but the fact that I was able to meet his family who gave me their blessing and assured me they had no doubt that I could complete what Bill Summers ideas or intentions were; the I-69, the medical school and strengthening the relationships with Mexico. It's like when you run track and somebody gives you the baton and they are in first place, I want to stay in first place. Those are my intentions. Bill Summers is a legend and someone that has made my job very easy because of the respect and the notoriety that he brought. That makes it easy for me because my foot is in the door. But even in Mexico, people are no longer in the positions they were when Bill was here. There is always going to be a change in leadership.

RGVision: Prior to this position, you served as the valley representative for Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson. What learned experiences do you bring to the Partnership?

Alvarez: My relationship with the senator is as strong now as it has ever been. I still keep her involved in the daily operations of South Texas, but I can tell you my prior position allowed me to understand how politics works, not only at the state level, but at the federal level. The steps that we must take to get a certain bill written, how to work with certain legislators to get language included, that's important.

This is important because we represent such a diverse group of members. I have to be very careful about the things we support. That is why we focus on education because that's a win-win. We focus on tourism, education and healthcare. One of the things that I really want to emphasize to everybody is the perceptions of the Valley. It is a very safe place to visit. When I travel north, people tell me "Oh! You live down there, where all the crime is," and I tell them that I feel safer in the valley than I feel in any other city in Texas.

RGVision: Do you think it is important who wins the presidential elections?

Alvarez: No, because we can work with anybody. It is not important to me who wins in Mexico or the United States. The only thing that is important is that they have the same vision.

RGVision: What is the difference between the Partnership and area chambers of commerce?

Alvarez: The difference between our chamber and local chambers is that we are the chamber for the entire valley. The Partnership fosters relationships and coordinates the programs that advance regional economic development for all of the region. We are the catalyst behind all of the projects, and I'm proud to be part of the Rio Grande Valley Partnership.