

## *A Border Wall Plan Unites Republicans and Democrats in Texas: 'This Is Insane'*

Plans for a wall in Big Bend National Park prompted public protests and behind-the-scenes lobbying to sway the Trump administration to stop.

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Reporting from the banks of the Rio Grande and the Big Bend region towns of Presidio, Redford, Terlingua and Alpine

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Where the Rio Grande cuts steep cliffs through the arid West Texas mountains, dozens of spring break visitors on a canoe tour learned that the barren landscape in and around Big Bend National Park could soon feature a towering steel border wall.

“There is no crisis on the border — only fun!” one river guide, Charlie Angell, told them. Another guide wore a hat reading “No al muro,” which translates to “No to the wall.” Nearby, a canoe inscribed with “No Wall” sat atop a pickup truck.

Upriver, Mario Peña, 62, checked on his alfalfa and fed a pen of goats where the border wall was slated to be built. “For us, it’s the farming,” said Mr. Peña, a retired oil field worker. “Our parents, our grandparents, we did all this — just to let it go?”

The national fight over immigration landed without warning last month in Texas’ Big Bend region, a remote stretch of inhospitable terrain that runs for hundreds of miles along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Despite President Trump's vow to complete a border wall along the southern frontier, the plan shocked West Texas. It also unnerved Republicans and Democrats across the state who wondered why the federal government would spend billions to build a wall through an area so remote.

But for the state's Republican leaders, the border wall plan presented a political predicament. While none have spoken in favor of a physical wall, public opposition could risk inflaming the Trump administration and alienating voters who prize border security.

Instead, top Texas officials, and some wealthy Republican donors, conveyed their opposition to Trump administration officials behind the scenes, according to two people briefed on the effort who requested anonymity to describe the private talks. They argued for border crossing detection technology in place of a 30-foot-high steel barrier.

"Sensible people who look at what's being proposed here think this is insane," said JP Bryan, a conservative former oil executive who owns two ranches and a popular hotel in the Big Bend region.

"Anyone who supports this ought to put their name on this wall, so it can go down in infamy forever."

The combination of private lobbying and public pressure — including demonstrations, letter-writing campaigns and a giant steel replica of the wall erected in the tourist town of Terlingua — appeared to pay off earlier this month.

Without a formal announcement, a Customs and Border Protection [online map](#) was changed to remove plans for a physical barrier in Big Bend National Park. Mike Banks, the Border Patrol chief, told Gov. Greg Abbott that there would be no wall in either the national park or the Big Bend Ranch State Park, according to a person briefed on the conversation who was not authorized to discuss it publicly.

“We are placing our construction efforts on hold adjacent to TPWD land and the Big Bend National Park,” Paul Enriquez, a border patrol official in charge of infrastructure, told officials from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, which runs state parks, in a March 6 email obtained through a public information request.

At the same time, in closed-door meetings with local officials this month, federal officials said a roughly 175-mile-long wall would still be built from the state park through Presidio and Hudspeth counties. A Customs and Border Protection spokesman did not respond to questions about the plan.

“They’re going to do this,” said José Portillo Jr., the county judge in Presidio County, who attended the meeting. “The fight is not over.”

For generations, the Big Bend area has been a low priority for border agents who have relied on the remoteness of the landscape and the harshness of its desert weather — where temperatures can swing from the 90s during the day to the 30s at night — as a deterrent. More recently, agents have used cameras and sensors to detect unauthorized crossings.

Even as migration surged during the Biden administration, the roughly 510 miles of the border patrol’s Big Bend region was an afterthought. This year, the border patrol has recorded an average of six crossings a day in the entire region.

“It’s the least active sector along the U.S.-Mexico border,” said Thaddeus Cleveland, the Republican sheriff of Terrell County and a local Border Patrol veteran.

Then last month, landowners along the river received letters from the federal government offering \$2,500 or \$5,000 for access to begin construction on “border security infrastructure.” The Trump administration appeared eager to press forward, looking to start building as soon as possible.

There were no public announcements or community meetings. Many learned about the coming wall from [The Big Bend Sentinel](#), the local newspaper. Others received calls from contractors looking for land that could be used to set up camps for workers, since much of the river sits far from any hotels.

“We don’t have a grocery store in the county, but we’re going to have a man camp,” said Joanna MacKenzie, the Republican county judge in Hudspeth County, which sits along the river west of the state park.

For most residents across the region, which includes working-class border towns like Presidio and the art tourism mecca of Marfa, the only official updates came from the C.B.P.’s online map, where a colorful line tracks the path of the proposed “[smart wall](#).” The colors indicate whether a physical wall will be built or a virtual barrier using “detection technology” will be installed.

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A physical barrier would cut off river access, threaten crops and cattle, and disrupt migration routes, critics said. The prospect of its construction has brought together environmentalists, former national park officials, seasonal river guides, tourists and wealthy ranch owners, galvanizing support for surveillance as a preferred approach to this section of the border.

“Rugged, isolated areas like Big Bend are great opportunities to deploy technology to aid in securing the border,” a spokesman for Governor Abbott, Andrew Mahaleris, said.

Many parts of the border already have such technology, and local residents and landowners said they did not object to an expansion of that approach in the region.

“There’s a tower watching us now,” said Charlie Cecil, pointing from the edge of a steep hill overlooking the Rio Grande at a surveillance tower bristling with sensors. The graves of his mother and two grandparents were on an adjacent hill, along the river outside Presidio.

Mr. Cecil and his wife, Lauren, had watched the online map for weeks as it changed several times without warning. They hoped to see the map line indicate a switch to “detection technology,” but so far the plans have remained for a physical barrier passing through their land.

In other parts of the region, landowners like Raymond Skiles, a retired ranger at Big Bend National Park, watched as the map no longer indicated wall construction for them. Mr. Skiles said he remained concerned about his riverside family property in Langtry, Texas.

“Frankly, that map is inadequate,” he said. “I’ll put some weight on it when I get a new letter.”

Mr. Portillo, the Presidio County judge, said that the apparent exemption for Big Bend National Park and other areas risked driving a wedge between the broad coalition of opponents and lessening the pressure to stop wall construction in the rest of the region.

Plans still call for the wall to be built through the town of Presidio, a border community of 5,000 people. Residents said they feared being physically and psychologically separated from Ojinaga, the much larger Mexican city across the river frequented for shopping and entertainment.

“What really saddens me is what is going to happen to our identity as border town people,” said Yosdy Valdivia, 27, an artist in Presidio whose mother is the mayor of Ojinaga. She recently opened Presidio’s first art gallery, looking to capture some tourism spillover from Marfa, an hour to the north. Business would most likely dry up if a steel barrier cuts across the landscape, she said.

“We never thought it would happen,” she said of the wall. “They want to disturb our peace.”