



Covarrubias: Port Laredo's World Trade Bridge: 25 Years Transforming North American Trade

What began as a solution to local congestion has become a critical junction in North American commerce, writes the director of the Texas Center for Economic and Enterprise Development.

BY DANIEL COVARRUBIAS • [GUEST COLUMN](#) • APRIL 17, 2025



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The entrance to the World Trade Bridge in Laredo – the busiest commercial bridge in North America. (Photo credit: Border-Now)

Twenty-five years ago, on April 15, 2000, the World Trade Bridge opened between Laredo, Texas, and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, not just as another concrete span across the Rio Grande, but as a deliberate \$128 million investment in integrated North American commerce. Today, this transformative infrastructure has become North America's busiest commercial crossing, handling over 6 million trucks annually and enabling a staggering \$339 billion in trade. In a quarter-century, it has elevated Laredo from a regional border town to America's #1 port of entry by trade value, surpassing giants like the Port of Los Angeles and Chicago O'Hare, an extraordinary achievement offering crucial lessons about infrastructure investment, binational cooperation, and visionary planning in border communities.

From Crisis to Opportunity

The World Trade Bridge was born of necessity. In the late 1990s, the explosive growth in cross-border commerce following NAFTA had overwhelmed Los Dos Laredo's downtown infrastructure. Trucks carrying the expanding North American trade backed up for miles through city streets, with only a single commercial lane on the old Juarez-Lincoln Bridge to handle the flow. What had once been manageable traffic had become an economic and environmental liability.

Faced with this challenge, leaders from both sides of the border pursued an ambitious solution: a dedicated commercial crossing located away from downtown congestion. Construction began in September 1998, and less than two years later, the eight-lane World Trade Bridge opened to significant binational recognition as a symbol of cross-border cooperation and shared economic vision.

What initially seemed like an oversized investment quickly proved prescient. Today, the bridge processes approximately 15,000 to 18,000 trucks on busy days, more than many other border crossings handle in a month. This volume represents nearly 40 percent of all U.S.-Mexico land trade crossing at a single point, a concentration of commerce unmatched anywhere else along America's international boundaries.

Creating North America's Premier Trade Gateway

The impact of the World Trade Bridge on trade volumes has been extraordinary. In the early 2000s, roughly one million commercial trucks per year entered the U.S. through Laredo, already triple pre-NAFTA figures. With the new bridge in place, those numbers surged.

By FY 2024, northbound truck crossings had grown at approximately 4% annually, with about 10,000 northbound trucks crossing daily. In total, Laredo handled over 6 million trucks crossing into the U.S. in 2024.

This traffic growth is reflected in trade values. Around the bridge's opening, Port Laredo handled tens of billions in merchandise trade. But since its opening, trade has grown remarkably—from \$80 billion in 2003 to a record high in 2024, with imports totaling \$210.8 billion and exports totaling \$128.3 billion. The Laredo customs district now processes over \$3.5 billion in goods weekly, with automobiles, electronics, machinery, and produce flowing north, while parts, components, and finished goods move south.

The World Trade Bridge's success has propelled Laredo to an achievement once unimaginable: in 2023, it officially became America's #1 port by trade value for the first time, a feat it repeated in 2024. This distinction is all the more remarkable considering Laredo lacks a seaport or major airport; it is the first land border crossing ever to claim the top spot in U.S. trade. Port Laredo now accounts for approximately 6.4% of all U.S. international trade, with \$340 billion in 2024 surpassing the Port of Los Angeles (\$333 billion), Chicago (\$331 billion), and major airports like JFK and Newark (approximately \$250 billion each).

On the global stage, Laredo's success is even more impressive. Despite being a land-based port of entry, Laredo competes with major international shipping hubs, placing 9th with an estimated 17.6–19.2 million TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units) in 2023. This volume exceeds the combined Los Angeles/Long Beach port complex (16.7 million TEUs), traditionally considered the largest U.S. marine gateway. While the leading global ports remain predominantly in China (Shanghai, Singapore, Ningbo-Zhoushan), Laredo's ranking showcases the increasing importance of land-based freight movement in international commerce.



Dr. Daniel Covarrubias, director of the Texas Center for Border Economic and Enterprise Development at Texas A&M International University. (Photo credit: TAMIU)

Beyond Numbers: A Regional Transformation

The bridge's influence extends far beyond trade statistics. It has fundamentally reshaped the identity and economic prospects of the Los Dos Laredos borderland region. Laredo today proudly wears the dual crowns of "Logistics City" and "Inland Port."

Roughly one-third of all local jobs are in trade, transportation, warehousing, customs brokerage, or related public sector roles. Since 2000, thousands of forwarding firms,

trucking companies, customs brokers, and third-party logistics providers have established operations to handle growing cargo.

Warehouse space has grown exponentially, with distribution centers lining the I-35 corridor and Mines Road leading to the bridge. In Laredo today, infrastructure needs now rival population considerations in planning local growth, as eighteen-wheelers have become a defining presence in the cityscape.

For residents of both Laredo and Nuevo Laredo, the World Trade Bridge represents the tangible benefits of cooperation across borders. As trade volumes grew, so did roads, utilities, and public services investments. Toll revenues have funded civic improvements, while the broader economic activity has expanded the tax base. Los Dos Laredos now function as an integrated economic zone, with workers, businesses, and families maintaining connections across the international boundary.

Yet this transformation has not been without challenges. The very success of the bridge has created new pressures, traffic congestion, air quality concerns from idling trucks, and infrastructure strain. The bridge that was built to solve congestion now faces capacity constraints of its own, processing far more vehicles than its designers ever anticipated.

Recognizing these challenges, officials have initiated two major infrastructure projects. The World Trade Bridge Expansion Project will add a second parallel span exclusively for northbound trucks with eight extra lanes while converting the existing bridge to 6 southbound lanes. This will increase total capacity from 8 to 18 lanes, more than doubling throughput. Additionally, Laredo recently received approval for a new international bridge in south Laredo (Bridge 4/5). This will further alleviate pressure on existing crossings and accommodate growing regional passenger and commercial traffic.

A Laboratory for Border Innovation

Throughout its 25-year history, the World Trade Bridge has served as a testing ground for border management innovations. After 9/11, Laredo pioneered programs that balanced security imperatives with commercial needs. It was among the first ports to implement C-TPAT (Customs-Trade Partnership Against Terrorism) and FAST (Free and Secure Trade) lanes, pre-vetting “trusted” companies and drivers for expedited clearance.

Laredo recently installed four new dedicated FAST lanes at the World Trade Bridge. These lanes allow approved truckers to bypass routine checks, reducing processing times. The FAST booths house U.S. CBP and Mexican SAT officers as part of the Unified Cargo Processing concept, where both countries’ customs agencies conduct joint inspections.

Another leap forward has been in non-intrusive inspection technology. In the early days, inspecting a truck meant a lengthy manual process. Today, drive-through multi-energy X-ray portals can scan a truck in motion, including a low-dose scan of the driver in-cab for safety. These advanced systems allow drivers to remain in their vehicles during scanning, with the technology adjusting radiation levels, lower for the cab area where the driver sits and higher intensity for cargo sections. These high-tech scanners, together with automated license plate readers and RFID tags, have streamlined inspections dramatically.

These technological innovations have proven essential for day-to-day operations and maintaining trade resilience during periods of extraordinary challenge. The World Trade Bridge’s capacity to adapt through innovation has been repeatedly tested through multiple crises that might have crippled less developed infrastructure.

A Quarter-Century of Adaptation

The World Trade Bridge has faced numerous tests over its quarter-century of operation. After 9/11, security mandates led to days-long backups, mitigated only by implementing trusted trader programs to separate low-risk shipments from unknown traffic. During the 2008 financial crisis, trade volumes temporarily dipped as consumer demand fell but rebounded quickly as manufacturers sought closer suppliers.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented perhaps the most significant challenge, as factories in Mexico shut down, and overall Laredo trade dropped about 10% in 2020. While the border closed to personal travel, trade was deemed essential and never halted completely. By late 2020, freight volumes surged back as supply chains adjusted, and in 2021, Laredo set new records. The pandemic reinforced the corridor's essential nature. Even in a global crisis, 18-wheelers rolled across the bridge to stock U.S. shelves and keep factories running.

Today, the bridge faces yet another transformation as nearshoring accelerates. As companies reconsider global supply chains, many invest in Mexico and ship to the U.S. by land. Laredo is already seeing evidence: in 2023, cross-border truck traffic jumped 6% (above the usual 4% trend), attributed to new factories in Mexico feeding U.S. demand.

At the same time, recently imposed tariffs present a new challenge for the trade corridor. Implementing a 25% tariff on Mexican imports has created uncertainty for businesses operating across the border, requiring rapid adjustments to supply chains and pricing structures. While certain exemptions have been granted, the month-to-month uncertainty surrounding North American trade has created a more complex environment for logistics planning.

Despite these challenges, the World Trade Bridge is set to play an even more central role in a reconfigured global economy as the trend toward regional production and shortened supply chains continues to gain momentum.

A Bridge of Commerce, Cooperation, and Connection

Twenty-five years after its inauguration, the World Trade Bridge has delivered on its ambitious promise. What began as a solution to local congestion has become a critical junction in North American commerce, transforming communities' physical landscape and economic horizons on both sides of the Rio Grande.

The bridge's success story is particularly relevant today, as conversations about borders often focus on division rather than connection. The World Trade Bridge offers a powerful counternarrative, evidence that well-designed infrastructure and thoughtful cooperation can create prosperity that flows in both directions.

As trucks continue to roll across its spans day and night, the World Trade Bridge stands as a testament to a simple truth: when we build bridges instead of barriers, we open pathways to shared progress. After 25 years and trillions of dollars in trade, this concrete and steel structure has proven to be much more than infrastructure; it has forever changed the destiny of a border region and strengthened the economic bonds between the two nations.

Editor's Note: The above guest column was penned by Dr. Daniel Covarrubias, Ph.D., director of Texas A&M International University's A.R. Sanchez, Jr. School of Business Texas Center for Economic and Enterprise Development. The column appears in the Rio Grande Guardian International News Service with the permission of the author. Dr. Covarrubias can be reached by email via: dcova@tamiu.edu

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