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Pharr Bridge expansion projects on track

By

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Three construction projects that will ultimately double capacity and significantly improve efficiency at the Pharr Bridge border crossing in South Texas are on track and should all be completed by 2026.

“Once it is all done, we will see a significant difference in the way we operate,” said Bridge Director Luis Bazan of the city-owned Pharr Bridge. “We will double the capacity and we will see a significant reduction in wait times. Today’s wait times which are typically 30 minutes to an hour will be cut to 10-15 minutes tops.”

Bazan noted that the driving force behind each of the projects is to help facilitate trade and travel between the United States and Mexico in a more efficient way. Of the three construction projects, two are being built under the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Donations Acceptance Program, which is defined as “a partnership mechanism to collaboratively explore and implement tangible solutions to trade and travel facilitation and enforcement challenges.”

The third project, which is the building of a twin bridge next to the existing Pharr Bridge, is a collaboration between the two owners of the bridge, the City of Pharr and Mexico. Each entity is charged with building one-half of the new 4-lane, 3-mile bridge.

Bazan recently updated *The Produce News* on the status of each project, the expected completion date and its value proposition.

DAP 15 (so named because the agreement was signed in 2015) is a CBP, GSA (Government Service Administration) and Pharr Bridge partnership that is adding 30 percent more capacity in the import parking lot. This essentially opens up new exit lanes to allow certified loads to pass over the bridge without being subject to wait times. Bazan said the project is nearing completion and is expected to be fully operational in the first quarter of 2024. He noted that the truck certification process called FAST (Free and Secure Trade) is a commercial clearance program for known low-risk shipments entering the United States from Mexico (and Canada). Exporters, importers and carriers can achieve this designation through an application and vetting process, in much the same way that travelers can avoid airport terminal lines with TSA precheck.

DAP 16, which was first signed in 2016, is a construction project that will expand the dry dock area, add cold rooms for inspections and create a lab and training center for product inspection. “The project is slated to go out for bid in 2024 and we are expecting completion by the end of 2025,” Bazan said.

He explained that the dry dock expansion is for both non-refrigerated agricultural goods as well as non-agricultural commercial products. The cold rooms will be built to specifically match the increase in demand because of more produce shipments.

“The addition of the Regional Agricultural Laboratory & Training Center with cargo release authority will help identify pests with a goal of allowing trucks to get in and out in a much quicker time frame than today,” said Bazan.

The building of the twin bridge is the most ambitious projects currently on the table. With Pharr and Mexico each owning 1.5 miles of the 3-mile bridge, each entity has agreed to build its own portion. “We broke ground on the Mexico side in April and they are currently building their part of the second bridge,” Bazan said. “On our end, we are hopefully going through the final environmental impact study and will begin construction by the summer of 2024. We are hoping to open the new bridge in the last quarter of 2025. When open it will add 100 percent more capacity with two FAST lanes for certified shipments.”

Bazan said going through the FAST certification process can be quite an ordeal so many companies have been reluctant to start the process until the existence of FAST lanes are a reality and the advantage of having that designation is tangible. He expects an increase in applications once DAP 15 is complete and the bridge expansion is further along.

While the City of Pharr works on these projects, it is also constantly reminding the produce industry that it is the number one crossing point in Texas for produce. “Sixty-five percent of produce crossings in Texas come over the Pharr Bridge,” Bazan said. “That represents 30 percent of the nation’s produce crossings.”

Bridge officials have hammered that point home at several produce-related events it has sponsored. In conjunction with the recently concluded International Fresh Produce Association convention in October, the Pharr Bridge held a 10th anniversary celebration in which it had 200 produce attendees.

In addition, the Pharr Bridge held A Taste of Trade event recently in which it invited local restaurant chefs to make dishes featuring the many produce items that cross that bridge every day. This was part of its annual Fresh on the Border event that serves as the kickoff for the beginning of the peak produce import season. The City of Pharr also held an Avocado Festival on Saturday, Oct. 21, to focus on the No. 1 produce import from Mexico that crosses the bridge. About 2.5 billion pounds of Mexican avocados will come into the United States in 2023 with almost all of them coming through Texas.

Finally, the Pharr Bridge folks are intent on increasing warehouse space in the city to handle the ever-increasing number of trucks loaded with merchandise crossing through that point and then using Pharr as a distribution center for the rest of the country. Bazan’s team has created the Industrial Warehouse Summit and invited investors, developers and bank officials to events that showcase the community and commercial opportunity. He said these summits will be held on an ongoing basis as an added value to the commercial users of the bridge for the expressed purpose of promoting warehouse construction.

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About Tim Linden |

Tim Linden grew up in a produce family as both his father and grandfather spent their business careers on the wholesale terminal markets in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Tim graduated from San Diego State University in 1974 with a degree in journalism. Shortly thereafter he began his career at The Packer where he stayed for eight years, leaving in 1983 to join Western Growers as editor of its monthly magazine. In 1986, Tim launched Champ Publishing as an agricultural publishing specialty company.

Today he is a contract publisher for several trade associations and writes extensively on all aspects of the produce business. He began writing for The Produce News in 1997, and currently wears the title of Editor at Large.

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