

Rio Grande Valley Landowners Plan To Fight Border Wall Expansion

Mayor Roberto Salinas, Roma, Texas
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Eloisa Tamez of El Calaboz, Texas, walks along the border wall in her backyard. She took the government to court over surveying her land and over the compensation she received for the land needed for border wall construction.

Reynaldo Leanos Jr./Texas Public Radio

President Trump last week vetoed a congressional measure aimed at blocking his national emergency declaration. The next battle over that emergency declaration will likely be in the courts.

Meanwhile, planning for extending the border wall is already happening in Texas' Rio Grande Valley.

More than 570 landowners in two counties, Hidalgo and Starr, [have received right-of-entry letters](#) from the government asking to survey their land for possible border wall construction.

Eloisa Tamez lives in El Calaboz, a small town outside of Brownsville, Texas. In 2007, she received a phone call that she describes as life-changing.

"I was notified by two border patrolmen, that 'did I know that my property was in the path of the planned construction of the border wall,' " Tamez said. "I told them I did not know."

The government wanted permission to access her land to survey it, but she refused, so they took her court, where her case dragged on for months, but, eventually — she lost her case.

"Within 24 hours after he gave the order, they built that," Tamez said, referring to the wall that now sits behind her property.

Next, came the battle for compensation.

The government originally low-balled her, she said, so she sued for more.

"The settlement that I got, which was \$56,000," Tamez said. "I converted some of that for scholarships for graduate nursing students."

Tamez said she didn't want the money and just wanted her land, without a wall.

Tamez's experiences in dealing with the government back then is similar to what other landowners went through — they fought, they lost, the wall was built.

Now it seems like those legal skirmishes will begin again.

Efrén Olivares, director of the racial and economic justice program at the [Texas Civil Rights Project](#), said this time around it seems more people will be impacted, but is hopeful more residents now know their rights.

"What happened last time ... a lot of people didn't know they didn't have to accept the first offer, so they signed without knowing they were giving up their rights," Olivares said.

Olivares said landowners in the Rio Grande Valley should know the courts can weigh in on the surveying and the compensation amounts.

In this latest effort to extend the wall, Congress has required the federal government to meet with local officials to discuss design and alignment of the border barrier.

I'm a big supporter of Border Patrol and Homeland Security and if they say they need it, I think we should comply and give them what they need.

In Starr county, Roma Mayor Roberto Salinas said he met with local Border Patrol officials three weeks ago to try to negotiate on behalf of his community.

"Right now what's planned below the center of town is an 18 feet steel fence," Mayor Salinas said. "We think that would be a detriment to tourism, instead what we would like to see is something more like a concrete barrier built with some decorative fencing on top of it that would enhance tourism."

Salinas said the border patrol officials were receptive, but there's no official contract.

Mayor Salinas said he understands both sides of the wall debate.

"Border Patrol and Homeland Security say they need the fence in order to do their jobs. I'm a big supporter of Border Patrol and Homeland Security and if they say they need it, I think we should comply and give them what they need," Salinas said.

The mayor said border officials assured him no homes would be displaced during the construction of a new border wall, but he's skeptical because they've walked back commitments in the past.

Elvira Canales, 90, in her home in Salineño, Texas. She owns land along the Rio Grande and says she won't sell it or give permission for a wall to be built there, because "its been in my family for generations."

Reynaldo Leanos Jr./Texas Public Radio

Ninety-year-old Elvira Canales lives in Salineño, a 15-minute drive west of Roma.

She said she recently talked to the Army Corps of Engineers about an upcoming road construction project near her property by the Rio Grande. Canales said she'll take legal action if the government tries to take her land for the road, or for the proposed wall.

"I won't sell it, or I won't give it permission because it's my property for generations and generations," Canales said.

The Canales family has not yet received an official letter from the government asking for permission to survey their land.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials provided NPR with a statement saying they prefer to avoid homes and other structures, and are in the preliminary stages of planning and designing in Starr County. CBP also said it has not finalized border wall construction timelines for the county.