

Willacy County Nature Center would be information center for all Rio Grande Valley ecotourism visitors



Judge Aurelio Guerra

By Steve Taylor

AUSTIN - Willacy County Commissioners Court recently entered into an agreement with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to promote and facilitate ecotourism. Commissioners are also seeking federal and state funds to develop county roads so that two wildlife refuges can be more easily accessed. And, they are looking to acquire land for a Willacy County Nature Center.

"In recent Commissioners Court actions, county leaders have reevaluated the county's abundance of natural resource as an asset and its innovative business potential to spur the local economy," Interim County Judge Aurelio Guerra told the *Guardian*.

Guerra believes Willacy County stands poised to become the "Gateway to the Rio Grande Valley," especially if tourists can stop off at a conveniently located nature center to learn about the

wildlife attractions in the county, and if two key county roads are paved.

The county has over 34,600 acres of refuge tracts run by the Fish and Wildlife and the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge. Commissioners believe that by focusing on improving access and mobility for nature tourists seeking to view diverse wildlife in its natural settings, they can exploit their geographical advantage as Gateway to the Valley.

Immediately after the agreement with Fish and Wildlife was signed, Judge Guerra and County Commissioner Eliberto Guerra visited the state Capitol to try to secure funds from the federal stimulus package to build paved roads to the East Lake and Teniente wildlife refuges.

"East Lake is a gorgeous lake and Teniente is superb also. The refuges belong to the public but we need to make the roads more accessible. They are basically caliche roads and we need them paved," Judge Guerra said.

Commissioner Guerra agreed. He said the East Lake tract covers about 1,000 acres and Teniente tract covers about 4,800 acres. Both are in his precinct.

"The potential is enormous," Commissioner Guerra said. "We have all kinds of birds and wildlife over there. A lot of people will be excited when we get these refuges on the map. You will see the tourists, the bird watchers come in. The other day we had staff from Parks and Wildlife over there, in thick brush, looking for a rare bird from Mexico. We can get people from London and all over

Europe," Commissioner Guerra said.

Willacy County commissioners are in agreement that ecotourism could be the county's economic salvation. Historically, the largely agricultural county, with a population of about 21,000, has been one of the poorest in Texas. Its unemployment rate is currently around 20 percent and its poverty rate is above 30 percent.

"Heritage tourism and ecotourism is the answer," Judge Guerra said, pointing out that the county is also looking to secure state funds to renovate its historic County Courthouse.

Guerra believes that with the right marketing strategy, Willacy County can position itself as the Gateway to the Valley, luring the thousands of tourists and Winter Texans that visit the region in the fall via the two major north-south arteries, U.S. 77 and U.S. 281.

"Nature tourism and its spending trends create a diversified local economy. It helps our hotels, restaurants, gas stations, gift shops, coffee shops and all types of retail," Judge Guerra said.

According to the South Texas Nature Marketing Coalition, the birding industry is worth about \$125-\$150 million to the Valley each year in economic impact.

In a Feb. 20 letter to Judge Guerra, Bryan R. Winton, refuge manager for the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge (LRGVNWR), extolled the benefits of developing ecotourism in Willacy County.

"Economic opportunities are unlimited for residents and business owners in Raymondville

who can capitalize on promoting the ecotourism benefits of these western Willacy county federal lands, due to the multitude of rare and unique wildlife present in the county, and because of the hundreds of thousands of visitors that visit this region in fall and winter to view wildlife," Winton wrote.

Winton said improvements are needed on County Road 10 (Rio Beef Road) if Willacy County is to capitalize on the Teniente tract.

"Currently, County Road 10 is a two-lane unimproved caliche road that is riddled with potholes and is often extremely dusty," Winton wrote. "Although the Refuge has established designated parking areas and trailheads with maps and information about the Teniente tract, the public access road is very uninviting due to the condition of the road, and lack of county-approved signage promoting the site as a nature destination."

As a result, Winton wrote, ten years after authorizing public access, the lands remain "virtually unknown" to the local community, except for deer hunters. He said there are many miles of unimproved trails and hiking paths present on the property.

"The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is dedicated to partnering with Willacy County to support and assist in all matters that improve access and appreciation of these lands for public benefit to the extent that those improvements do not overly impact wildlife," Winton added. "We are committed to finding and

striking a balance between the needs of wildlife and the needs of people."

County Judge Guerra and Commissioner Guerra said they did not get much encouragement that federal stimulus money could be allocated for their county road improvement projects when they met with Texas Department of Transportation Executive Director Amadeo Saenz.

"Amadeo gave no indication we could get any stimulus money but we are not giving up," Judge Guerra said. "Our time in Austin has not been wasted. We learned a lot. We got good feedback. I feel we are going to progress as a county. I'm looking at this current recession as an opportunity. I believe we will come out ahead."

Judge Guerra said he based his optimism in part on the growth of the Valley and the fact that the only way the region can grow is northward.

Commissioner Guerra said he is hopeful that state Sen. Eddie Lucio, D-Brownsville, who sits on the Senate Finance Committee, and state Rep. Tara Rios Ybarra, D-Kingsville, who sits on the Agriculture Committee, can help the county find the funds to establish all-weather roads to the refuge tracts.

County commissioners have also contacted U.S. Rep. Silvestre Reyes, D-Corpus Christi, to see if he can help secure funding for the county's eco-tourist related projects.

In a March 24 letter to Judge Guerra, the LRGVNRW Refuge Manager Winton said Fish and Wildlife support efforts to build a Nature Center in the county to serve as a multi-purpose

environmental facility that would establish the City of Raymondville as the 'Gateway to the Valley' for ecotourism purposes."

If the Nature Center is built adjacent to a scenic area and/or wetlands, Winton said, "visitors entering Willacy County can stop and tour the scenic grounds for bird/wildlife watching but also to promote the many other nature related facilities found in the four southern counties of South Texas."

He added that the Nature Center "would serve as the 'Gateway' and provide an introduction to the many other related facilities found throughout south Texas."

We fully support the idea of a facility that would better promote the many varied environmental education and nature viewing opportunities present in south Texas."

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