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OPINION // COMMENTARY

Commentary: Border policies President Biden should pursue

By Dennis E. Nixon and Woody L. Hunt, For the Express-News Jan. 20, 2021 Updated: Jan. 20, 2021 1:49 p.m.

A letter to the new president

Dear President Biden:

Your administration's first 100 days will be critical. Much of your time will, appropriately, be focused on the continued response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the economic wreckage it has caused, and to mending the fabric of a frayed nation. But as residents of the border, we encourage you not to lose sight of four other key issues that should be addressed swiftly to start moving our nation and our economy in the right direction.

First, you should work with Congress to fully fund staffing and improvements at our undermanned and antiquated ports of entry. The pandemic has exposed the dangers of far-flung supply chains. To return jobs to the U.S. from other countries, including China, Congress approved the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA) with strong bipartisan support. Now we must modernize our ports of entry to effectively and efficiently handle the increased trade resulting from this agreement.

We need transportation infrastructure to allow better ingress and egress from the ports of entry and major highways. Bringing our ports of entry into the 21st century will benefit the entire nation, increasing our global competitiveness and creating and retaining jobs in manufacturing hubs across the country — from Wisconsin to Pennsylvania, Washington to Ohio — well into the future.

Second, our country's immigration system is desperately in need of reform. The last four years have decimated an already broken legal immigration system. While we need enhanced border security to keep bad people out, we should make it easier for the right people to enter and stay in the United States.

A path to citizenship for Dreamers and DACA recipients is a good start. However, our immigration policies are at odds with the demographic realities of our aging population and lower birth rates that require more foreign-born workers — both low-skilled and high-skilled — to support a growing economy. Farmers and ranchers have trouble finding the seasonal labor they need, while high-tech companies have trouble locating engineers.

The United States is in a global contest to attract and retain talent. To that end, providing permanent legal status to DACA recipients makes sound economic sense. Our policies must allow us to compete for

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the workers we need to fuel our economy, and to retain the talent that already exists here, but that lacks the certain future of permanent legal status.

Third, your designee for secretary of Homeland Security, Alejandro Mayorkas, said at his confirmation hearing that he intends to halt construction of the expensive border wall. This should also encompass a moratorium on related land condemnation along the U.S.-Mexico border. While border wall construction in Arizona is predominately on federally owned land such as military bases or national parks, in Texas, the bulk of wall construction would be targeted for private property, which severely impedes farmers and ranchers' reasonable use of their land by destroying access to the Rio Grande.

Rather than a wall, common-sense tactics to improve border security should include two of the highest priority requests from Border Patrol agents: cleaning up the Rio Grande riverbanks by removing non-native Carrizo cane and salt cedar to create a clear line of sight along the riverbanks, and removing barriers to give agents better access to the riverbank. Along with the deployment of a video surveillance network to quickly detect, track and respond to border threats, these changes would enhance border security far more effectively than a costly wall.

Finally, your administration should immediately lift the restrictions on surface crossings at our borders with Mexico and Canada. Businesses already hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic have been devastated by the Department of Homeland Security's supposedly temporary border closures instituted in the early days of the pandemic. They remain in place — without any scientific or medical rationale.

After nine months of shutting out so-called nonessential travel across U.S. borders, including shoppers who account for as much as 60% of retail sales in border communities, the restrictions have left many businesses unsure if they will recover once the pandemic is over.

Your first 100 days will be critical, and the steps your administration takes in that time will chart the course for our nation — and your administration — over the next four years. We urge you to restore to Washington a proper appreciation and understanding for the role the borders play in our national security and economic prosperity. It will serve you and the country well.

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