

## Colonia residents praise Gonzales for successful passage of street lighting legislation

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ALTON - Rep. Veronica Gonzales, D-McAllen, heard first hand about the problems of colonia residents having no street lighting at a union hall in San Juan last December. The residents turned out the lights in the hall to show her what it was like. "We are out in the country. It's just black," the residents said. "People should not be able to come up to your front yard and steal the items we have worked so hard to buy."

Gonzales recalled the encounter after holding a press conference at the La Home Meadows home of Enedino Medellin in Alton on Saturday morning. The press conference was staged to announce that House Bill 775 - Gonzales' first bill as a lawmaker - had been signed into law by Gov. Rick Perry.

"HB 775 provides a basic need that should be afforded to all constituents in District 41," Gonzales said. "This legislation goes beyond light posts. It is about illuminating border residents with the reality that conditions will continue to improve."

More than 100 residents were present at the press conference, along with LUPE and United Farm Workers Union leaders such as Rebecca Flores and Juanita Valdez-Cox. "Si Se Puede," the residents chanted, as Gonzales explained that the legislation was inspired by their efforts.

At the San Juan meeting, migrant worker Lourdes Prado had explained the need to electrify her backyard when she goes north for work in the summer. Gonzales praised Prado for attending legislative hearings on the bill during the regular session.

"The residents told me about how kids could not walk to the park or play outside," Gonzales said. "I left the meeting in San Juan feeling really touched by them. I wanted to do something for them. That is why this was my first bill."

HB 775 requires that between five and 15 percent of Community Development Block Grant money received by Texas cities and counties for colonia road improvements be set aside for colonia lighting projects. Cutbacks in CDGB funding by the federal government means the precise amount of money available for colonias is now in doubt. Before the cutbacks, Gonzales said, anywhere between \$38,341 and \$115,002 would have been available. "\$115,000 could erect quite a few lights in these areas," Gonzales said.

Gonzales said the cost of maintaining existing street lighting was only about \$7.60 per light per month.

"If the counties can pay for the maintenance, we would prefer it, but the residents have said they do not mind paying a little extra in their utility bills in order to have the lights," Gonzales said. "They can pay for it a lot easier through a few cents per month than they can go out and buy their own light posts and erect them." Gonzales chose the Medellin house for the press conference because a home made street light had been erected outside. "People should not have to do that," she said.

Gonzales paid tribute to Rep. Norma Chávez, D-El Paso, chair of the House Border and International Affairs Committee, and Sen. Eddie Lucio, D-Brownsville, chair of the Senate International Relations and Trade Committee, for their help with the legislation.

Hortencia Armendariz, until recently the lead community organizer for LUPE, said the focus now had to be on county government to get new street lighting installed.

"The first step was the community coming together and saying, this is our need. Then Representative Gonzales took a huge step in getting this bill into law. Now, it's on the county commissioners' table," Armendariz said. "People need street lighting in order to feel safe. It also builds community spirit and when the whole community gets involved, then a whole network of activism begins."

Hidalgo County Judge Ramon Garcia said he attended the press conference to acknowledge Gonzales' efforts and to let the community know that county government does care.

"We have over 800 colonias in the county and the largest indigent population in the state. There is a tremendous amount of need for infrastructure," Garcia said. "It is important that we acknowledge Veronica's efforts. Even though she is elected from the wealthiest part of our county, she is out here involving herself in issues that are affecting the poorest of our county. That speaks very well of her."

Garcia said CDBG grants were being "gutted" by around ten percent. He said the Valley's members of Congress had done their best to mitigate the cuts but without the help of strong lobby groups, "programs for the poor are always the first to get hit."

Garcia promised that some CDBG funds would go towards erecting street lights in the county's colonias.



Rep. Veronica Gonzales speaks to colonia residents in Alton