

Hinojosa: University merger gets Valley a seat at the table

The support of the entire community is needed to make the school a reality.

How many times have you heard — perhaps even said — that the Valley deserves a seat at the table? How often do you hear people refer to San Antonio as South Texas?

On Thursday, the University of Texas System Board of Regents unanimously passed a resolution to give the Rio Grande Valley not only a seat at the table, but a plate with a big juicy steak on it. And on Friday, Chancellor Francisco Cigarroa and other UT System officials flew to the Rio Grande Valley to share the news with the community.

Specifically, the Board of Regents voted to unite the Rio Grande Valley by creating a new single university that will span the entire region. This newly created university — which will include campuses in Edinburg and in Brownsville, along with the soon to be created medical school — will, for the first time, be eligible to receive millions of dollars from the Permanent University Fund.

The PUF is a fund created by the State of Texas to finance public higher education. It was established in 1876 by the Texas Constitution and was funded with land in West Texas. When oil was struck under those lands, the PUF grew in value and now is an endowment worth more than \$12 billion. Monies in the PUF may be used for “eligible” institutions within the UT and A&M systems, but up to now, the University of Texas-Pan American and UT-Brownsville have not been PUF-eligible schools.

So what will it take to make this new university and PUF eligibility a reality? First, it will take the passage of legislation in the upcoming session, legislation which my Valley colleagues and I will file and for which we will strongly advocate. Second, it will take a united Valley to support this measure. The universities, from their presidents to their students, are cheering this on, but we need the help of everyone — parents, the medical community, business owners and public officials. For too long, we have thought and acted as individual cities, but we have discovered that a regional approach brings much more success.

And if the legislation passes, what will this mean to deep South Texas? It means that millions of dollars may be available to construct buildings, establish the Valley medical school, hire premier faculty, develop groundbreaking research and create many other programs.

The unification means that the Valley would become home to one of the two largest Hispanic serving institutions in the United States, one that would focus on the needs of the Valley and be a bicultural, bi-literate center for excellence.

The possibilities are endless and the transformation of the Rio Grande Valley through education will be a dream closer to reality.

While there are many details left to work out and while this is in its infancy, we would not be where we are at today without the vision and the tenacity of University of Texas System Chancellor Francisco G. Cigarroa, M.D., Vice Chancellor Pedro Reyes and Board of Regents' Chairman Gene Powell, all of whom hail from South Texas. Four years ago, Chancellor Cigarroa laid out his vision for the UT System, part of which was to assure that a flag was planted in the Rio Grande Valley.

That flag is now being planted and with the support of everyone in our community, it will wave proudly to benefit generations to come.

State Sen. Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa represents District 20.