UTSA
The University of Texas at San Antonio™

Compete.
Council on Competitiveness

Competitiveness Conversations Across America

Securing Texas' Critical Infrastructure

San Pedro 1 Data Science Center
University of Texas at San Antonio
March 10–11, 2025

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Letter from The Hon. Deborah L. Wince-Smith

Dear Council Community,

In today's increasingly competitive, technology-driven global economy, U.S. economic leadership and national security rely on the country's ability to innovate at speed and scale. Setting the global pace of innovation is imperative to the United States' productivity, prosperity, and security—in other words, its competitiveness.

For nearly four decades, the Council and its extensive membership of national leaders—which include business CEOs, university presidents and chancellors, labor leaders, and directors of U.S. DOE National Laboratories—has played a foundational role in developing innovation frameworks that have dramatically increased U.S. competitiveness, from introducing the concept of "clusters of innovation" in the 1990s in our work with Harvard Professor Michael Porter to hosting the nation's first Innovation Summit in 1998, to developing the "Innovate America" agenda in 2003.

Around five years ago, Council leadership recognized that the competitiveness landscape was quickly changing due to several converging technological revolutions, including AI, quantum, biotechnology, nuclear, advanced manufacturing, etc. The convergence of these platform technologies and new business models are driving remarkable breakthroughs in addressing national and global issues in sectors like food, energy, and security. The pace of disruption from innovation is only continuing, with many new technologies on the horizon, promising transformational opportunities for the country that discovers, develops, and commercializes them.

Understanding the United States' future prosperity is linked to optimizing our society for an increasingly innovation-driven world, the Council launched the National Commission on Innovation and Competitiveness Frontiers (Commission). This multi-year initiative unites over 60 National Commissioners—among them Dr. Taylor Eighmy, President of the University of Texas at San Antonio, who Co-hosted with me the Texas edition of the Competitiveness Conversation—drawn from diverse regions and sectors, all committed to enhancing our innovation capacity and driving sustained productivity.

In Phase 1 of the Commission's work (2020-2023), the National Commissioners examined how tools such as generative AI and new workforce models empower individuals and institutions to innovate and scale new products and services. From this work, an important finding emerged: far too much of America's talent remains untapped, and there is a major risk from the hyper-concentration of America's innovation assets in a few densely populated, extremely costly innovation hubs. For example, San Francisco, San Jose,

New York, Boston, and Los Angeles collectively account for over 70 percent of all U.S. venture capital investment.

The United States is losing out on innovative potential across the nation by not fielding our talent from across the nation. To address this, the Commission is redefining the concept of "place" in the context of innovation, broadening the innovation ecosystem beyond traditional hubs to ensure that every community can contribute to and benefit from the evolving innovation economy.

In support of this vision, and to develop a new framework of place-making innovation, the Council, under the auspices of the Commission, launched the "Competitiveness Conversations Across America," a series of high-level gatherings that engage multiple stakeholders at local, state, and regional levels. Our goal is to elevate best—and next—innovation practices and broaden participation in the innovation economy.

During our Texas edition of the Competitiveness Conversation Across America series, titled "Fortifying the Future—Innovation in Critical Infrastructure Security," which was held at The University of Texas San Antonio's San Pedro 1 downtown campus, regional and national leaders from business, higher education, and government discussed how San Antonio and the broader region have grown into a hub of cybersecurity, technology, and national defense, among other crucial industries.

We heard from national policymakers like the Hon. Tony Gonzales, United States Congressman; local government leaders like the Hon. Peter Sakai, Judge, Bexar County, and the Hon. Marina Alderete Gavito, San Antonio Councilwoman; leaders of the regional research enterprise like Mr. Adam Hamilton, President and CEO, Southwest Research Institute; subject matter experts like Mr. Charles "Chuck" Bondurant, Director, Critical Infrastructure Security and Risk Management (CISRM), Public Utility Commission of Texas; ecosystem builders like Mr. Jim Perschbach, CEO, Port San Antonio; economic development leaders like Mr. Glenn Hamer, President and CEO, Texas Association of Business, and Mr. Luis Rodriguez, President and CEO, San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce; academic leaders like Dr. David Garza, President, Tec de Monterrey; and business leaders like Mr. Brad Morrison, Board of Directors, Texas Space Commission, Dr. Gilroy Vandentop, Vice President Corporate University Research, Intel Labs; and many others. They all brought tremendous perspective to the factors underpinning San Antonio's rise as a national—and global—hub for cybersecurity and critical infrastructure security, among other advanced industries.

Following a day of high-level discussions, I took away many key lessons from Texas that warrant broader consideration. Let me share four with you here:

- **San Antonio's growing technological capabilities, buttressed by initiatives from the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) in areas like AI, cyber, and digital manufacturing, position it as an anchor for the U.S. national security enterprise.** The region's dedication to enhancing its innovation ecosystem—including significant investments in the cybersecurity hub at Port San Antonio, fostering a growing startup ecosystem, developing a concentration of talent, attracting greater private investment, the major military presence, and many other factors—is vital to the United States' competitiveness amid growing threats on the nation's critical infrastructure.

- **"To out-compute is to out-compete," and protecting the nation's digital resources is essential to U.S. competitiveness.** Cybersecurity and critical infrastructure security is about developing resilience and business continuity, and this should not be seen as a cost center but, rather, a productivity enabler. Investing in this resilience not only mitigates the risks of devasting cyberattacks but also drives economic growth, with studies showing a sevenfold return on every dollar invested.
- **Trade between Texas and Mexico fuels Texas and U.S. competitiveness.** Texas' economy surpasses both Russia and Italy, and the state plays a central role in North American trade, with Mexico being its largest trading partner. Trade with neighboring Mexico has helped propel Texas into its position as among the country's leading economic powerhouses. Industries such as automotive, aerospace, semiconductors, and agriculture rely heavily on cross-border trade for talent, production, research, and customers.
- **Securing Critical Infrastructure Requires Cross-Sector Collaboration.** Securing critical infrastructure in Texas—and across the United States—requires a highly integrated approach, where the private sector, governments at all levels, research institutions, and military collaborate effectively. This collaboration helps ensure that both physical and digital infrastructure are protected against emerging threats, allowing for long-term sustainability and competitiveness.

As a final note, I would like to thank my Co-host Dr. Taylor Eighmy, President of the University of Texas at San Antonio, and Acting President of UT Health San Antonio for partnering with me and the Council on the Texas edition of the Competitiveness Conversation Across America series.

Dr. Eighmy's experience, leadership, and support deeply enriched our understanding of why San Antonio (and Texas) stands out as an admirable model of place-making innovation.

We look forward to continuing our collaboration with the many innovative organizations in Texas, and we are eager to share the valuable insights gathered from this discussion with the Council Community and broader audience.

Sincerely,

The Hon. Deborah L. Wince-Smith
President and CEO
Council on Competitiveness

Agenda

Monday, March 10, 2025

EVENING

6:00 Registration and President Reception

7:00 Welcome

Dr. Taylor Eighmy
President, University of Texas at San Antonio
Acting President, UT Health San Antonio

The Hon. Deborah L. Wince-Smith
President and CEO, Council on Competitiveness

7:15 Competitiveness Conversation Dinner

The Hon. Peter Sakai
Judge, Bexar County, Texas

9:00 Dinner Concludes

Tuesday, March 11, 2025

MORNING

8:00 Breakfast and Networking

8:30 Putting Competitiveness in Context: Challenges and Opportunities in Texas

To launch the Texas edition of the Competitiveness Conversations Across America series—taking place under the auspices of the National Commission on Innovation and Competitiveness Frontiers—the Co-hosts will frame the grand challenges and opportunities facing Texas and the United States, with a specific focus on the imperative of critical infrastructure security (CIS) for U.S. competitiveness.

Dr. Taylor Eighmy
President, University of Texas at San Antonio
Acting President, UT Health San Antonio

The Hon. Deborah L. Wince-Smith
President and CEO, Council on Competitiveness

9:00 Securing America's Future: Harnessing the State's Innovation Capacity and Capabilities to Build the Industry that Protects All Industries

As threats to our digital and physical assets grow increasingly complex, effectively harnessing the full spectrum of resources within Texas' innovation portfolio is vital for developing cutting-edge solutions that enhance resilience and security. In this session, leaders from across sectors and domains will examine the

pivotal role of Texas' innovation ecosystem in positioning the state as a global leader in technological innovation, cybersecurity, and critical infrastructure protection.

Key Questions to Consider

1. How is the state rethinking traditional models to define, coordinate, and support local, state, and regional innovation?
2. Why has the state been successful in attracting innovative talent and firms?
3. What major investments in infrastructure, technology, and talent are shaping the Texas innovation ecosystem?
4. Looking at the grand challenges facing the world—and focusing on Texas' strengths—what is the state doing to leverage technological disruption for competitive advantage?

Stage Setter

Dr. Nicole Beebe
Assistant Vice President, Faculty Research Development, University of Texas at San Antonio

Panel

Mr. Charles "Chuck" Bondurant
Director, Critical Infrastructure Security and Risk Management (CISRM), Public Utility Commission of Texas

Mr. Adam Hamilton
President and CEO, Southwest Research Institute

Mr. Geoffrey Urbach
Product and Partnerships Lead, Emerging Technology, City of San Antonio

Moderator: Mr. Charles Woodin
CEO, Geekdom

9:45 Quantum Tech Talk: Revolutionizing Healthcare, Manufacturing, and Critical Infrastructure Security

Dr. Jeff Prevost
Assistant Director, University of Texas at San Antonio
Open Cloud Institute

10:00 Break

10:15 Critical Infrastructure Security: Industry, the Public Sector, and the Military

Critical infrastructure security requires cross-sector, highly integrated collaboration between the private sector, government, research enterprise, and defense forces. Leaders from across these stakeholder groups will discuss how they are working together to secure Texas' infrastructure, and what more can be done.

Key Questions to Consider

1. What is the biggest threat to Texas' infrastructure today?
2. What are the biggest challenges that must be overcome in protecting U.S. critical infrastructure?
3. Why is close collaboration between different sectors a necessary step?

Stage Setter

Dr. David Brown
Executive Director, National Security Collaboration Center (NSCC), University of Texas at San Antonio

Panel

Mr. Rick Driggers
Cyber Practice Lead, Accenture Federal Services, Accenture

Mr. David Mendoza
Information Security Manager, San Antonio Water System

Mr. Jim Perschbach
CEO, Port San Antonio

Dr. Francine Romero
Board Chair, CPS Energy

Moderator: Lt. Gen. (R) John Evans
President and CEO, Evans Strategic Solutions, LLC

11:00 Greetings from Congressman Tony Gonzales: Positioning Texas as the Global Critical Infrastructure Security Leader

Congressman Tony Gonzales will share what Texas must do to safeguard the nation's critical systems, and how Texas' leadership role in CIS benefits U.S. national security.

Introduction

Dr. Michelle Atchison
Director of Federal Relations and Senior National Security Strategist, University of Texas at San Antonio

A Message From

The Hon. Tony Gonzales
United States Congressman, United States House of Representatives, District 23

11:10 Break

11:20 Beyond Borders: Expanding Economic Collaborations Across Texas and the Region

South Central Texas (San Antonio/Austin) is a rapidly-evolving innovation ecosystem and a key reason why Texas is the second fastest-growing economy in the United States. Drivers of economic development from across the state highlight how Texas is expanding its regional innovation identity through a strategic vision, greater collaboration, and increased investment. The Interstate 35 corridor (that connects the St. Lawrence Seaway/Great Lakes to Mexico) is a backbone of innovation zones in Texas. Industry sectors including automotive, aerospace, chips, and food rely on this geographic artery for R&D and movement of goods, services, and labor.

Key Questions to Consider

1. What is Texas' strategic economic vision for the future, and how is the state uniting to bring this vision forward?
2. Texas shares a large international border, across which goods, ideas, and people move rapidly. What challenges and opportunities does this present?
3. How can Texas organizations better collaborate inside and outside of the state?

Stage Setter

Mr. Rod McSherry
Associate Vice President, Innovation and Economic Development, and Director of the Valdez Institute for Economic Development, University of Texas at San Antonio

Panel

The Hon. Marina Alderete Gavito
San Antonio Councilwoman, District 7

Mr. Luis Rodriguez
President & CEO, San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce

Mr. Carlos Serna
Deputy Secretary of Promotion and Innovation at the Secretariat of Economy, State of Nuevo Leon, Mexico

Moderator: Mr. Glenn Hamer
President and CEO, Texas Association of Business

AFTERNOON

12:00 Lunch

12:15 Lunch Keynote

Introduction

Dr. Taylor Eighmy
President, University of Texas at San Antonio
Acting President, UT Health San Antonio

Keynote

Ms. Jenna Saucedo-Herrera
President and CEO, Greater: SATX

1:00 Leveling Up Texas Talent: Building an Unmatched Tech Workforce

To build a secure future, Texas needs a workforce of innovators ready to tackle the evolving security problems facing the state. This panel will discuss how to cultivate a highly skilled and adaptable talent pool that can develop and implement the innovation needed to protect U.S. critical infrastructure. Topics will include investment needs across education, new training approaches, and fresh models of collaboration with industry leaders to ensure the Texas workforce remains at the forefront of technology, security, and innovation.

Key Questions to Consider

1. What are the innovation, technology, and CIS jobs of tomorrow?
2. How can educators and employers better collaborate to fill skill gaps?
3. How can Texas and the country bring more people into the innovation workforce?

Stage Setter

Dr. Diana Huffaker
Associate Vice President, Research Partnerships and Strategy, University of Texas at San Antonio

Panel

Dr. David Garza
President, Tec de Monterrey

Mr. Dean Gefen
CEO, NukuDo

Dr. Heather Shipley
Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs, University of Texas at San Antonio

Moderator: Mr. Joe Sanchez
Executive Director and Secretary of the Board, Cyber Texas Foundation

1:45 Tech Talk: Cybersecurity—Protecting Critical Infrastructure in Our Connected World

Mr. Victor Murray
Assistant Director, High Reliability Systems Division, Southwest Research Institute

2:00 Investors in Innovation: Financing Texas' Innovation Economy

Consistent and reliable capital is the lifeblood of commercializing and scaling innovation, be it CIS, cybersecurity, or any other tech-driven sector. In this session, leaders of some of Texas' leading innovation investors will highlight how they are providing the backing needed to kickstart a new wave of technology growth in the state, and opportunities that would expand innovation investment even further.

Key Questions to Consider

1. Why does Texas attract so much investment from both inside and outside the state?
2. How can investors and innovators create deeper and more sustainable partnerships?
3. What barriers or risks could be removed to accelerate investment in the state?

Stage Setter

Mr. Rod McSherry
Associate Vice President, Innovation and Economic Development, and Director of the Valdez Institute for Economic Development, University of Texas at San Antonio

Panel

Ms. Korry Castillo
Associate Deputy Comptroller, Office of Texas Comptroller

Mr. Sebastian Garzon
Executive Director, Alamo Angels

Dr. Gilroy Vandentop
Vice President Corporate University Research, Intel Labs

Moderator: Mr. Aaron Demerson
President and CEO, Texas Economic Development Corporation

2:45 Break

3:00 Mapping the Enabling Conditions for Texas' Competitiveness Strategy for the Next 25 Years

Pulling from insights gathered throughout the Texas Competitiveness Conversation, leaders from across the region will examine the enabling conditions essential for the state's competitiveness strategy over the next 25 years, including the intersection of policy, infrastructure, education, innovation, and workforce development.

Key Questions to Consider

1. What do you envision as the most significant opportunities and challenges for Texas' economic competitiveness over the next 25 years?
2. What initiatives are necessary to strengthen the culture of innovation and entrepreneurship in Texas?
3. What key learnings from the state should be elevated to the national level to improve the productivity and innovation capacity of the United States?

Stage Setter

Dr. Nicole Beebe
Assistant Vice President, Faculty Research Development, University of Texas at San Antonio

Panel

Dr. David Brown
Executive Director, National Security Collaboration Center (NSCC), University of Texas at San Antonio

Mr. Brad Morrison
Board of Directors, Texas Space Commission

Mr. AJ Rodriguez
Executive Vice President, Texas 2036

Moderator: Mr. Drew Scheberle
Executive Director, National Security Innovation Council

3:45 Charting a Path Forward—Reflections of the Conversation from the Co-chair

Dr. Taylor Eighmy
President, University of Texas at San Antonio
Acting President, UT Health San Antonio

The Hon. Deborah L. Wince-Smith
President and CEO, Council on Competitiveness

4:00 Competitiveness Conversation Concludes

Cross-cutting Themes and Big Ideas

1. **The technology industry is crucial for the future of Texas' competitiveness.** Software development, cloud computing, and remote work transcend many of the political and legal barriers that affect other industries, allowing for uninterrupted innovation and investment. The growth of Texas tech hubs like San Antonio presents an opportunity for deeper collaboration in emerging fields like artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and fintech. As trade-related industries face uncertainty, Texas' technology sector provides a stable and scalable economic bridge to Mexico's growing digital economy.
2. **Organizations Must Adopt Collective Defense to Secure Data and Strengthen Infrastructure Resilience.** As data becomes increasingly valuable in the digital age, securing it has emerged as a critical priority for organizations across industries. Protecting data requires a comprehensive and strategic approach, particularly considering the evolving cyber threat landscape. The concept of "Collective Defense" calls for to extend their security measures beyond internal systems, incorporating the security efforts of partners and collaborators.
3. **The need for security must be balanced with the speed and of innovation.** The nation's competitiveness is hindered by too much bureaucracy, secrecy, and classifying too much information unnecessarily—stifling innovation. To promote security while fostering the spirit of partnership needed for innovation, stakeholders must take a more standardized and collaborative approach to securing digital infrastructure.
4. **With the growing vulnerabilities of quantum-based hacking, the United States must expand its understanding of quantum cybersecurity.** As quantum technology continues to evolve, addressing the challenges of quantum cryptography will be essential for maintaining data security on a global scale. Texas has taken a lead in this space, demonstrated by organizations such as UTSA's Quantum Institute for Cyber Resilience (QuICR).

5. **By becoming hyper-integrated into the fabric of the community, organizations can cultivate greater innovation in the defense industry.** Port San Antonio—a public entity that serves as a hub for aerospace, cybersecurity, defense, and technology companies—has embraced a community-driven approach, and works with the greater city to foster a culture of openness that is essential for sharing new ideas, expanding professional and social networks, and increasing business and entrepreneurial opportunities.
6. **To support Texas' rapid growth, Texas must continue to protect its key resources, particularly power and water.** While the state has made significant progress in developing its digital infrastructure, its resource management systems must evolve to meet the demands of emerging technologies. Data centers, which are essential for AI and other innovations, place immense pressure on water supplies, yet water infrastructure has not received sufficient attention. Without proactive investment in modernizing these systems, Texas risks falling behind in attracting innovation-driven industries that require reliable resources.
7. **Institutions of higher education must evolve to prepare students for an uncertain future.** To equip students for careers in industries that may not yet exist, universities must prioritize adaptability and resilience alongside technical skills. Expanding access to alternative education pathways, skills-based training, and retraining programs will help bridge the growing skills gap, particularly in emerging fields like cybersecurity. Tec de Monterrey's academic model, for example, has incorporated a balance between lecture-based learning and challenge-based learning. Since 2019, their "Tec 21" model has incorporated a fifty/fifty mix of traditional lectures and hands-on, real-world projects, allowing students to collaborate directly with industry partners.
8. **Under strong leadership, universities can spark tremendous economic development in a city.** University-led developments, like UTSA's new San Pedro 1 and San Pedro 2 downtown campuses, create concentrations of specialized talent, which then infuses the community with innovation that launches businesses, creates jobs, incentivizes private investment, and develops a greater concentration of industry. This is happening today in San Antonio in cyber and critical infrastructure security.

Behind the Scenes

Opening Remarks from Conversation Co-chairs

PANELISTS

The Hon. Deborah L. Wince-Smith
President and CEO, Council on Competitiveness

Dr. Taylor Eighmy
President, University of Texas at San Antonio
Acting President, UT Health San Antonio

Key Discussion Points

To open up the Texas edition of the Competitiveness Conversations Across America series, Dr. Taylor Eighmy, President of the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) and Acting President of UT Health San Antonio, discussed the advantages of UTSA's status as a relatively young university and its ongoing merger with the UT Health Science Center San Antonio. This merger, once completed—expected in September 1, 2025—will significantly enhance the university's research capacity and economic impact, making UTSA the third-largest research institution in the state. The combined institution will have an estimated $6.5 billion contribution to the economy. As part of this growth trajectory, UTSA also acquired the Southeast Campus in 2022, a move that reflects the university's commitment to expansion and innovation.

Dr. Eighmy then shifted to the venue of his speech and the Competitiveness Conversation Dinner, The Ursuline Convent and Academy, noting its long history of changing ownership before being revitalized by UTSA. **This transformation, he explained, is emblematic of the UTSA's broader dedication to investing in and shaping the future of downtown San Antonio.** Major projects such as San Pedro I, the site of the Competitiveness Conversation, and San Pedro II

“San Antonio is the city for Americans, by Americans.”

Dr. Taylor Eighmy
President, University of Texas at San Antonio
Acting President, UT Health San Antonio

are central to UTSA’s downtown expansion efforts and important to the region’s growth in cyber and infrastructure security innovation. As he put it, “As an anchor institution, The University of Texas at San Antonio plays a prominent role in the city’s development.”

Expanding his focus beyond UTSA, Dr. Eighmy discussed San Antonio’s growing national prominence, stating that it is poised to become the sixth-largest city in the United States. San Antonio a hotspot for economic activity and a place of great cultural significance, featuring a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization-designated tdWorld Heritage Site.

However, for San Antonio’s continued success, it must pursue expanding and developing partnerships to grow the innovation economy even broader. Dr. Eighmy addressed the importance of Texas-Mexico bilateral trade, calling it an invaluable pillar of the region’s economic stability. Seeing the broader parrel with San Antonio’s development and the United States’ economic ecosystem, Dr. Eighmy discussed the importance of national competitiveness, introducing the audience to the Council’s flagship initiative, the National Commission on Innovation and Competitiveness Frontiers. Concluding his speech, he described this initiative as a transformative effort that is shaping how the United States ensures long-term economic strength and technological leadership on the global stage.

Following Dr. Eighmy’s remarks, The Hon. Deborah L. Wince-Smith, President and CEO of the Council on Competitiveness, delivered a speech outlining the Council’s ongoing efforts to strengthen U.S. competitiveness in an era of rapid technological change and geopolitical rivalry. She opened by noting that the first Competitiveness Conversation of 2025 will continue galvanizing regional innovation ecosystems, insights gathering about best—and next—practices for place-making innovation, and build on the momentum of innovation-led development, which were important outcomes from the previous editions of the Competitiveness Conversations Across America series. Acknowledging President Eighmy’s work in expanding connections with Mexico, she described San Antonio as a vital economic anchor, supporting both regional and national development.

To introduce the Council’s work, Ms. Wince-Smith explained that the organization was founded as a response to economic competition with Japan. During the Reagan administration, concerns over industrial productivity led to the creation of the Commission on Industrial Productivity, which ultimately gave rise to the Council as a private-sector-driven organization. She then articulated the Council’s definition of competitiveness, describing it as a combination of productivity and prosperity.

"The Nation's future in every sense depends on our science and technology."

The Hon. Deborah L Wince-Smith
President and CEO, Council on Competitiveness
National Commission Co-Chair

To promote productivity and prosperity throughout the nation, the United States must continue to support science and technology. Ms. Wince-Smith noted that the world is experiencing an era of extraordinary turbulence, characterized by multiple technological revolutions occurring at an unprecedented pace. For the first time in history, she observed, machines may surpass human intelligence, surfacing tremendous opportunities but also raising critical questions about the regulatory landscape. She challenged policymakers to strike a balance between fostering innovation and maintaining necessary safeguards, asking how they can shape the regulatory environment without stifling private enterprise and how the U.S. can develop new technologies at both speed and scale.

One of the most pressing global challenges, she noted, is the resurgence of great power rivalry, particularly with China. "The Great Power rivalry has returned," she said.

China's technological advancements pose distinctive challenges as they are inherently dual-use in nature, meaning they can be applied for both civilian and military purposes. To counter this growing threat, Ms. Wince-Smith called for a renewed focus on U.S.-Mexico collaboration, as well as a broader effort to reignite the United States' innovation engine.

Ms. Wince-Smith warned that depending solely on a few isolated innovation hubs is not a sustainable strategy for maintaining national competitiveness. Instead, building on the Council's groundbreaking work from the 1990s with Harvard Professor Michael Porter on innovation clusters, she argued a new model for place-based innovation is needed—one driven by intentional place-making to dramatically expand the number of participants and locations engaged in the innovation economy.

Ms. Wince-Smith then introduced the Council's latest report, *Competing in the Next Economy: Innovation in the Age of Disruption & Discontinuity*, which lays out an ambitious vision for U.S. competitiveness. The report calls on stakeholders nationwide to take bold and strategic actions to achieve a ten-fold increase—10x—in innovation. Reaching this goal, she explained, will require sweeping changes, including new efficiencies, investments, coordination, realignments, and programs. Such a private-led effort will be possible only through collaboration among policymakers, industry leaders, academia, labor groups, and other key stakeholders. This collective push must include the formation of new public-private partnerships, a revitalization of international engagement, enhancements to the nation's innovation

infrastructure, regulatory streamlining, and an expanded, highly skilled U.S. workforce prepared to lead in the innovation economy.

The Competing in the Next Economy: Innovating in the Age of Disruption & Discontinuity report, a significant document form the Council's flagship initiative the National Commission on Innovation and Competitiveness Frontiers (Commission),

is the result of extensive discussions conducted throughout 2023 and 2024, involving over 50 National Commissioners and hundreds of leaders across various sectors, regions, and disciplines. It contains 55 recommendations aimed at unleashing innovation in the United States, with seven designated as urgent priorities requiring immediate national attention and action. These recommendations are structured around seven key pillars of innovation, addressing the critical barriers and opportunities necessary to achieve 10x productivity growth. The challenges facing the nation—ranging from technological disruption to geopolitical competition—demand a proactive, collaborative approach from all sectors of society.

Like the *Competing in the Next Economy* report, the Competitiveness Conversations Across America series is also a Commission initiative. National Commissioners, like President Eighmy, cohost the Competitiveness Conversations with the Council to better understand the dynamics underpinning their regional innovation ecosystems, to activate these activities even further and, through the Council's extensive network, scale the best practices nationally.

The introductory remarks from by Dr. Eighmy and Ms. Wince-Smith set the stage for the important discussions scheduled to take place the following day at UTSA's impressive $92 million, 167,000-square-foot San Pedro 1 / National Security Collaboration Center building in downtown San Antonio. Before breaking, however, dinner attendees had the opportunity to hear from the Hon. Peter Sakai, Judge of Bexar County. In this dual role, he oversees both judicial and administrative duties, presides over the commissioners court, serves as the county's chief executive officer, and leads emergency management efforts.

DINNER KEYNOTE

The Hon. Peter Sakai

The Hon. Peter Sakai
Judge, Bexar County, Texas

Key Session Insights

The Hon. Peter Sakai, the County Judge of Bexar County, Texas, is a dedicated public servant and a key advocate for foster care programs. Introduced by President Eigmhy, Judge Sakai has significant leadership roles in the community. Notably, Judge Sakai is the only County Judge in Texas who has previously served on the bench as a judge.

Having grown up in South Texas as the son of a farmer and the child of Japanese immigrants, Judge Sakai has a deep appreciation for the contributions of immigrants to American society. He believes that immigration strengthens local communities and makes them more dynamic and innovative.

There are two aspects of San Antonio that Judge Sakai believes make the city so great. First, the fact that its residents actively engage in discussions on crucial issues, working together to find solutions and drive progress. The second ingredient is San Antonio's collaborative and communicative culture.

One of the critical issues Judge Sakai addressed is the lack of participation among Texas foster children in university training programs, with only three percent taking advantage of these opportunities. Identifying the reasons behind this, Judge Sakai and Bexar County officials realized that the state often abandoned foster children once they aged out of the system. To combat this, Bexar County launched the Bexar County Fostering Educational Success project. This initiative established centers to provide mentorship and services to foster children, helping them transition into higher education and stable careers—an example of how innovation can empower disadvantaged groups, ensuring more members of the community have the opportunity to succeed.

San Antonio's innovation has uplifted its community members, but it also plays a critical role in the nation's future through its advancements in cybersecurity. In today's intercon-

"It is incumbent on us individuals in our local community to take care of people in our community so they can continue to innovate and create."

The Hon. Peter Sakai
County Judge, Bexar County

nected world, every sector of the economy relies on a secure cyber environment. Judge Sakai noted that cybersecurity is an ongoing necessity, as a single attack can rapidly damage an entity's reputation and stability. Texas stands at the forefront of the national cybersecurity landscape, with the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) leading advancements in this field.

But the Judge noted how maintaining leadership in cybersecurity will only happen by regional leaders' continuous efforts to forge strong partnerships. Judge Sakai called for Texas to expand its collaborations, particularly with Mexico, recognizing the immense value of cross-border partnerships. Regionalism is a powerful force, and Judge Sakai noted that bringing manufacturers and workforce initiatives together across borders can create a harmonized and mutually beneficial economic environment. He stated, "We do not need to beat anybody, we just need to be the best we can be and take advantage of our connections."

According to Judge Sakai, the development of talent and innovation is a collective responsibility. Everyone participating in the Competitiveness Conversation has a role in fostering growth, ensuring that Texas and the broader region continue to be a hub for economic and technological advancement.

PANEL

Putting Competitiveness in Context: Challenges and Opportunities in Texas

PANELISTS

The Hon. Deborah L. Wince-Smith
President and CEO, Council on Competitiveness

Dr. Taylor Eighmy
President, University of Texas at San Antonio
Acting President, UT Health San Antonio

Session Overview

To kick off the Texas edition of the Competitiveness Conversations Across America series—taking place under the auspices of the National Commission on Innovation and Competitiveness Frontiers—the co-hosts framed the grand challenges and opportunities facing Texas and the United States, with a specific focus on the imperative of critical infrastructure security (CIS) for U.S. competitiveness.

Key Session Insights

Dr. Taylor Eighmy, President of University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) and Acting President of UT Health San Antonio, opened by outlining UTSA's role in fostering innovation through initiatives such as San Pedro 1, , which includes the university's Data Science Center—a school that hosts 16 UTSA research centers, institutes and college-level labs, including the MATRIX AI Consortium for Human Well-being and the Open Cloud Institute—as well as the university's expanding presence in downtown San Antonio.

Beyond UTSA's local initiatives, he discussed the necessity of maintaining competitiveness at the university, the city, and the state of Texas, making building an innovation-driven economy a coordinated strategic priority. President Eighmy compli-

"The world is going to need San Antonio in an incredible way with the rise of great power conflicts."

Dr. Taylor Eighmy
President, University of Texas at San Antonio;
Acting President, UT Health San Antonio

mented the Council's flagship National Commission on Innovation and Competitiveness Frontiers' Competitiveness Conversations Across America series for supporting this larger vision, not only in Texas but around the country, by working to redefine how every region in the United States innovates and increases productivity. This focus on innovation is particularly relevant in an era of rapid digital transformation, where the explosion of global data and the increasing connectivity of billions of devices were reshaping how we live and every industry.

According to Dr. Eighmy, a critical aspect of this transformation is the rise of the "5th Industrial Revolution," characterized by human-digital connections, digital twins, and AI integration. He explained that the digital world is becoming the most important frontier, and securing it had to be a top priority. UTSA played a key role in the expansion of the digital ecosystem through projects such as CyManII, which focused on securing digital twins in manufacturing. The university's new College of AI, Cyber, and Computing further built on this foundation by combining foundational disciplines with applied research in IT, logistics, and AI-driven applications.

Looking beyond Texas, he turned to the crucial economic ties between the United States and Mexico. Strengthening this relationship was essential for U.S. competitiveness, particularly considering increasing tensions with China. Deepening connections with Mexico and Canada would help the United States navigate these global power struggles while ensuring continued economic growth. Ultimately, he argued places like San Antonio were essential to securing the United States' innovative and competitive future, making investments in regional innovation a national imperative.

Following Dr. Eighmy's remarks, The Hon. Deborah L. Wince-Smith opened the discussion by outlining San Antonio's critical role in the national security enterprise, particularly given the resurgence of great power rivalries. San Antonio's geography, she noted, makes it particularly important to the security of the United States. San Antonio sits at the geographic center of North America, and is a crucial accessway to Mexico and South America, as well as Atlantic and Pacific ports. By virtue of being this geographic center, San Antonio must accept its responsibility of being a regional innovation anchor for the nation.

Turning to the broader landscape of innovation in the United States, Ms. Wince-Smith revealed a pressing concern: although regional innovation ecosystems were emerging, the expansion of the U.S. innovation economy was not occurring fast enough to maintain competitiveness in an increasingly fierce global environment. Texas plays an important role America's innovation capacity and

"San Antonio has to accept the responsibility of its geography as a regional anchor of America."

The Hon. Deborah Wince-Smith
President and CEO, Council on Competitiveness
National Commission Co-Chair

capability, and in the Texas edition of the Competitiveness Conversation Across America series, the Council is focused on exploring how Texas has succeeded in becoming a hub of critical infrastructure and cybersecurity.

Resilience, cybersecurity, and critical infrastructure security, she explained, had long been central to the Council's mission. She recalled that in 2004, the Council had declared, "To out compute is to out compete," and protecting our digital resources is essential to U.S. competitiveness. In this sense, investing in digital security is a productivity enhancer, not a cost burden. During and following the COVID-19 pandemic, cyberattacks had escalated dramatically, particularly against American pharmaceutical companies. These attacks are a massive threat to the U.S. innovation enterprise because they expose our innovator's intellectual property. One striking example she cited was China's theft of sensitive data from a major company, which remained hidden for two years on a Dunkin' Donuts server. Given the dramatic consequences of cyberattacks, investing in infrastructure security yielded significant economic returns, with every dollar invested in cybersecurity resulting in a sevenfold return. Cybersecurity is not a technical necessity, "it is an economic and security imperative for our way of life."

In her closing, Ms. Wince-Smith urged a deeper appreciation for San Antonio's potential as a nexus of security, innovation, and economic growth. The city is a confluence of critical assets, with its unique ability to contribute to national security and technological advancement.

PANEL

Securing America's Future: Harnessing the State's Innovation Capacity and Capabilities to Build the Industry That Protects All Industries

PANELISTS

Mr. Charles "Chuck" Bondurant
Director, Critical Infrastructure Security and Risk Management (CISRM), Public Utility Commission of Texas

Mr. Geoffrey Urbach
Product and Partnerships Lead, Emerging Technology, City of San Antonio

Mr. Adam Hamilton
President and CEO, Southwest Research Institute

Moderator: Mr. Charles Woodin
CEO, Geekdom

Session Overview

As threats to our digital and physical assets grow increasingly complex, effectively harnessing the full spectrum of resources within Texas' innovation portfolio is vital for developing cutting-edge solutions that enhance resilience and security. In this session, leaders from across sectors and domains highlighted the pivotal role of Texas' innovation ecosystem in positioning the state as a global leader in technological innovation, cybersecurity, and protecting U.S. critical infrastructure.

Key Session Insights

The day's opening panel explored the dynamics of technological progress and security, challenging the notion that these two forces must inherently be at odds. In fact, the panelists made the case for how carefully integrated security measures can foster innovation rather than stifle it.

Mr. Charles "Chuck" Bondurant, Director of Critical Infrastructure Security and Risk Management at the Public Utility Commission of Texas, opened the discussion by addressing one of the state's most pressing concerns: the stability of its power grid. Mr. Bondurant shared several strategies for creating greater stability on the grid. He painted a vivid picture of the mounting pressures facing Texas' energy infrastructure, citing the rapid expansion of AI farms and an ever-growing population as key stressors. These factors, he explained, are placing unprecedented demands on the system. These demands, in turn, elevate the consequences of any disruptions, and they are forcing a fundamental shift in how energy security is approached.

Mr. Bondurant also advocated for increased energy generation to support the state's growing demands while also advocating for smarter, more efficient energy consumption. He pointed out the benefits of incentivizing homeowners to contribute excess solar energy back to the grid, a step that could alleviate some of the strain on traditional power sources.

"Some people believe the more innovative you are, the less secure you become. How do we balance that?"

Mr. Charles Woodin
CEO, Geekdom

Furthermore, Mr. Bondurant advocated for moving beyond traditional, rigid regulatory checklists. Instead, he promoted a risk-based model allowing for greater flexibility and adaptability for utility users and providers. By working closely with utility providers, the Public Utility Commission of Texas can engage in the proactive security strategies and provide the mentorship necessary to effectively anticipate and manage emerging threats before they escalate into crises.

Mr. Adam Hamilton, President and CEO of the Southwest Research Institute (SwRI), then shifted gears from energy security to securing the major driver of growing energy demand—artificial intel-

"As we encourage more power generation, we must balance costs to keep the utility bills affordable for citizens."

Mr. Charles "Chuck" Bondurant
Director, Critical Infrastructure Security and Risk Management (CISRM)
Public Utility Commission of Texas

ligence. He argued that **in an age increasingly dominated by AI and machine learning, security-conscious cultures are more necessary than ever to protect sensitive data.** One proactive approach being taken by SwRI is to develop internal AI models rather than relying on publicly available platforms.

Mr. Geoffrey Urbach, Product and Partnerships Lead for Emerging Technology in the City of San Antonio, offered his perspective of how San Antonio has adopted a structured governance approach for large-scale project development undertaken by the city, which ensures collaboration among government agencies, private enterprises, and academic institutions throughout the development process.

A prime example of this forward-thinking approach is the city's proactive stance on AI policy. By adhering to the NIST framework, San Antonio has implemented rigorous protocols to assess potential AI-related risks, including biases in decision-making algorithms, transparency in data usage, and other cybersecurity vulnerabilities. Mr. Urbach also shared an ambitious initiative that has the potential to revolutionize urban planning and disaster preparedness—digital twins. Digital twins are advanced simulation tools that enable city planners to model infrastructure scenarios, predict the impact of natural disasters, and optimize resource allocation, ultimately making San Antonio more prepared and resilient in the face of future challenges.

Furthermore, for Texas to accelerate its innovation-led economy, it must have continued access to a workforce equipped with the skills to innovate. Mr. Urbach stressed the urgency of aligning education with the needs of the tech industry, ensuring that students and workers are equipped with the necessary skills to thrive in STEM and security careers. He noted that San Antonio ranks sixth in the nation for the risk of job losses due to the rise of AI, making workforce development a critical priority for the region's long-term economic stability.

Mr. Hamilton expanded on this idea by discussing the importance of outreach to every community in the region. By creating educational pipelines that align with industry needs, Texas can position itself as a national leader in both AI innovation and cybersecurity. Besides taking advantage of local talent, Texas should also strategically leverage its proximity to Mexico to further cultivate a robust and highly skilled labor force capable of driving forward the region's high-tech industries.

"We have to start with culture. People have to be aware of the risks that are out there."

Mr. Adam Hamilton
President and CEO, Southwest Research Institute

"We need to embed security into innovation from day one with structured governance."

Mr. Geoffrey Urbach
Product and Partnerships Lead, Emerging Technology
City of San Antonio

As the discussion wound down, the panelists collectively reinforced a crucial takeaway: security and innovation are deeply interconnected; they must coexist to drive sustainable progress. Through structured governance, proactive AI policies, forward-thinking workforce development strategies, and a deeply ingrained culture of security awareness, Texas has the potential to set a national benchmark for technological resilience. Through the approaches that San Antonio has taken to integrate resilience into every part of the innovation process, the state can serve as a model for other regions striving to balance innovation with the imperative of safeguarding their infrastructure.

QUANTUM TECH TALK

Revolutionizing Healthcare, Manufacturing, and Critical Infrastructure Security

Dr. Jeff Prevost
Assistant Director, University of Texas at San Antonio Open Cloud Institute

Key Session Insights

Dr. Jeff Prevost, Assistant Director at the University of Texas at San Antonio, Open Cloud Institute, provided an insightful overview of the impact of quantum technologies on critical sectors such as healthcare, manufacturing, and infrastructure security. The powerful capabilities of quantum technology could lead to disastrous consequences for national security if not properly controlled. While quantum technologies have the potential to revolutionize industries, their development must be carefully monitored to prevent misuse.

For example, Dr. Prevost discussed how quantum sensing innovations, such as OPM MEG, could revolutionize medical imaging by eliminating the need for cryogenics, breakthroughs that will improve diagnostic accuracy and patient outcomes dramatically. However, as quantum technology becomes more integrated into critical health systems, there is greater exposure risk, such as the ability to secure sensitive data like electronic medical records.

The increased need for quantum security is particularly pressing given the threat that quantum computing poses to current encryption systems. Encryption and decryption processes rely on public and private keys to ensure secure data exchange. However, quantum computers can crack RSA-based encryption using Shor's algorithm, which could compromise the security of vast amounts of sensitive information. To counter this risk, NIST has called for the development of new encryption standards, focusing on lattice-based protocols that are resistant to quantum attacks. This transition, however, faces substantial challenges, as there are currently 8.8 billion IT devices worldwide, all of which will need to be updated with new

post-quantum encryption systems. As quantum technology continues to evolve, addressing these challenges will be essential for maintaining data security on a global scale.

The danger presented by quantum cryptography is already present in critical sectors such as manufacturing, which Dr. Prevost explained has vulnerabilities that quantum hackers could exploit. Manufacturers have traditionally relied on air-gapped systems to protect their operations, ensuring that critical infrastructure remains isolated from external threats. However, the growing demand for remote access has led many to violate the air-gap rule, creating vulnerabilities that can be exploited through simple actions, such as an employee clicking on a malicious email. With this increasing threat, the manufacturing industry must adopt greater security measures, especially as quantum computing becomes more prevalent. As the industry adapts to these changes, cybersecurity must evolve to meet the growing risk of quantum-enabled attacks.

With the growing vulnerabilities from quantum-based hacking, Dr. Prevost argued the United States must expand its understanding of quantum cybersecurity. Texas has taken a lead in this space, demonstrated by organizations such as UTSA's Quantum Institute for Cyber Resilience (QuICR). QuICR is conducting research in areas such as quantum mathematics, quantum devices, systems, networks, and quantum algorithms. By focusing on these areas, the institute is helping to build the foundation for secure quantum technologies. Besides expanding the research on quantum cryptography, the United States must also ensure it has enough workers trained in this crucial discipline. Texas again is taking a lead in fulfilling this need through workforce development initiatives like CyManII, which partners with UT Health San Antonio to train the next generation of quantum cybersecurity professionals. These efforts aim to ensure that there is a skilled workforce capable of addressing the challenges posed by quantum computing, particularly as the field of quantum security continues to expand.

> "The United States must ensure that quantum computers in the wrong hands do not create bad outcomes for the nation."
>
> **Dr. Jeff Prevost**
> Assistant Director, University of Texas at San Antonio Open Cloud Institute

While quantum technologies offer immense potential to revolutionize fields like healthcare and manufacturing, they also present significant security challenges. The ongoing research at institutions like QuICR, along with workforce development initiatives like CyManII, are crucial in preparing for a future where quantum technologies are securely integrated into these critical sectors. Ensuring that quantum advances are deployed safely will require a coordinated effort across research, industry, and government. With thoughtful planning and collaboration, quantum technologies can be harnessed for the greater good, without compromising security.

PANEL

Critical Infrastructure Security: Industry, the Public Sector, and the Military

PANELISTS

Mr. Jim Perschbach
CEO, Port San Antonio

Mr. Rick Driggers
Cyber Practice Lead, Accenture Federal Services, Accenture

Mr. David Mendoza
Information Security Manager, San Antonio Water System

Dr. Francine Romero
Board Chair, CPS Energy

Moderator: Lt. Gen. (R) John Evans
President and CEO, Evans Strategic Solutions, LLC

Session Overview

Critical infrastructure security requires cross-sector, highly integrated collaboration between the private sector, government, research enterprise, and defense forces. Leaders from across these stakeholder groups discussed how they are working together to secure Texas' infrastructure, and what more can be done.

Key Session Insights

The panel discussion on critical infrastructure security explored the best practices in securing the critical infrastructure systems of not only Texas, but the greater United States. Panelists shared insights on the need to balance security measures with innovation while addressing the growing threats to both the physical and virtual systems society relies on like clean, available water, and safe, reliable, affordable, and clean energy.

Resilience is a critical factor in maintaining competitiveness, particularly in the face of evolving challenges to infrastructure and resource security. As Lt. Gen. (R) John Evans, President and CEO of Evans Strategic Solutions, LLC succinctly described it: critical infrastructure security is crucial in this renewed age of "Great Power Conflict." To support the industries needed for U.S. competitiveness, the power supply must be secure. This is becoming more difficult, due to the tremendous rise in power demand due to shifts in the climate and the influx of large load users, according to Dr. Francine Romero, Board Chair of CPS Energy. While a significant percentage of the state's power now comes from non-carbon-based sources, up to over 80 percent in certain periods, security concerns persist. According to Dr. Romero, there is a lack of reliable data on future power usage, and there are supply chain vulnerabilities.

"We need to focus on how we integrate deterrence to support the United States and our allies, in this age of Great Power conflict that we find ourselves in again."

Lt. Gen. (R) John Evans
President and CEO, Evans Strategic Solutions, LLC

Large data centers, which seek out reliable, abundant, and affordable power, location shop but make it difficult for utilities, because they are hesitant to make firm infrastructure commitments. This pushes legislatures to incentivize major data center development projects, which is putting even greater strain on power utilities. Additionally, the rise of independent "islands" of energy production raises questions about long-term strategic planning. Stressing the need for an integrated planning approach, Dr. Romero, a former planning and zoning commissioner, pointed out, "We are not talking enough in cities about how we manage this new demand and where it goes."

One effective strategy for securing the U.S. energy supply is to create additional sources of energy to make our grid more expansive and diversified in its power sources. Dr. Romero

advocated for a greater implementation of nuclear technology, particularly Small Modular Reactors (SMRs). She shared SMRs have the potential to be "extremely important" for grid resilience and are a promising technology for securing long-term energy supply. Adding to Dr. Romero's point, Mr. Evans discussed the logistical challenges of power distribution. He explained that the DoD spends considerable time and resources moving power, showing the need for more flexible and resilient energy solutions like the use of mobile microgrids, in addition to the previously mentioned SMRs, to provide reliable energy distribution in the future

Beyond the capacity and investment needed to expand and modernize physical infrastructure, cyber threats pose another major challenge to critical services. Dr. Romero warned utilities are under constant cyber-attack, prompting CPS Energy to bolster its cybersecurity defenses. CPS Energy is actively collaborating with U.S. Homeland Security and local officials to develop a coordinated response to these threats.

Mr. David Mendoza, Information Security Manager at San Antonio Water System, offered a practical perspective on the challenges of securing critical infrastructure. He noted implementing security controls is essential, as is the ability to detect cyberattacks. With prevention being the best way to maintain resiliency and organizational continuity, his team works diligently to identify vulnerabilities before they can be exploited. "We need to think like an attacker," Mendoza stated. Furthermore, he shared how his team works to do the basic security steps extensively and well, including knowing which devices are exposed to the internet and scenario planning to address potential threats. He also stressed the importance of maintaining a comprehensive inventory of devices and their potential impact on business operations to better assess the risks posed by cyber threats.

"There's not going to be innovation and competitiveness without a reliable power supply."

Dr. Francine Romero
Board Chair, CPS Energy

Data is the second most important currency for a company, after financial profit, according to Mr. Rick Driggers, Cyber Practice Lead of Accenture Federal Services. Therefore, securing data has become increasingly important, especially in the context of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and in the post-quantum cryptography era. He also discussed the concept of "Collective Defense," which calls for expanding security beyond a company's network to also include its vendors and business partners. Mr. Driggers shared an example of a Russian cyberattack, in which hackers gained access to a large organization through a small HR company that worked with it, illustrating the vulnerability of smaller businesses as entry points for larger attacks. To secure crtical data, stakeholders must understand the full scope of the network infrastructure, and Mr. Driggers pointed out that Chief Security Officers often have limited visibility of the networks they are tasked with protecting.

"San Antonio is a city that always strives to move forward."

Mr. Rick Driggers
Managing Director, Cyber Practice Lead, Accenture

"By opening Port San Antonio to the community, industries and government have the chance to see emerging technology and find new opportunities."

Mr. Jim Perschbach
CEO, Port San Antonio

Although securing our data resources is crucial for our national security and the resilience and continuity of industry, the need for security must be balanced with the speed and of innovation. Mr. Jim Perschbach, CEO, Port San Antonio, argued that the nation's competitiveness is hindered by too much secrecy and classifying too much information unnecessarily, stifling innovation. Mr. Perschbach explained the approach taken by Port San Antonio, a public-entity that serves as a multi-use industrial and technology complex. Covering over 1,900 acres, Port San Antonio serves as a hub for aerospace, cybersecurity, defense, and technology companies. Port San Antonio prioritizes open access and collaboration between government, industry, and the community; as outlined by Mr. Perschach, this model provides valuable lessons for accelerating innovation in the United States.

One approach to promoting regional innovation within the defense industry Port San Antonio is taking is to become hyper-integrated into the fabric of the community. Port San Antonio works with the greater city to foster a culture of openness that is essential for sharing new ideas, expanding professional and social networks, and increasing business and entrepreneurial opportunities. Port San Antonio has also worked to integrate defense contractors, universities, and local industries, thereby building relationships and creating an environment conducive to innovation. Mr. Perschbach gave examples of how Port San Antonio helped facilitate student collaborations with government security branches like the Air Force to build gaming machines—creating onramps that help strengthen the country's future skilled workforce.

To promote security while fostering the spirit of partnership needed for innovation, stakeholders must take a more standardized and collaborative approach to securing digital infrastructure. Mr. Driggers raised concerns about the fragmentation of cybersecurity efforts

within the federal government, noting that competition between agencies often complicates efforts to address cybersecurity challenges. He called for the elimination of internal barriers within the federal government, suggesting that the private sector, where much of the innovation is happening, should take a leading role in shaping cybersecurity policies. He reiterated the importance of Collective Defense and the vast amount of data shared across industries, which necessitates a unified approach to securing digital infrastructure.

Wrapping up the session, the panel concluded that securing critical infrastructure requires a collaborative approach that spans across sectors and includes both physical and cyber dimensions. While addressing the challenges of securing data, energy supplies, and digital infrastructure, all organizations must balance maintaining security with advancing innovation. As technology continues to evolve, particularly with advancements in AI, quantum computing, and energy production, it is crucial to adapt security frameworks to keep pace.

The insights shared during the session reaffirmed that resilience is vital for ensuring long-term competitiveness and sustainability. Moving forward, all stakeholders must work together to address emerging threats and innovate without stifling progress.

Greetings from Congressman Tony Gonzalez: Positioning Texas as the Global Critical Infrastructure Security Leader

The Hon. Tony Gonzales
United States Representative, Texas, District 23

Key Session Insights

In a virtual greeting, attendees heard from Congressman Tony Gonzales, who represents the 23rd District of Texas, which covers more than 800 miles of the southern border—the largest border district in the country, larger than 30 states, and encompassing two time zones. congressman

> "Cybersecurity is no longer just a technical issue, it is an issue of national security."
>
> **The Hon. Tony Gonzales**
> United States Congressman
> United States House of Representatives, District 23

Conzales positioned Texas as a leader in global critical infrastructure security, focusing particularly on the state's role in cybersecurity. San Antonio's leadership in cybersecurity is crucial for the United States, since, as Congressman Gonzales emphasized, cyberattacks now represent one of the most significant threats to the nation's safety and stability.

San Antonio is a pioneer in the field of cybersecurity, and this national leadership position is growing with its maturing ecosystem designed to support cybersecurity innovation and development. Texas' leadership in the cybersecurity field has been buttressed by Texas Governor Abbott's initiation of Texas Cyber Command, a key initiative designed to bolster the state's defenses against cyber threats.

Through the efforts of Texas' private industries and its political leaders, the state is not only addressing domestic cybersecurity challenges but is also positioning itself as a global hub of innovation for critical infrastructure security.

PANEL

Beyond Borders: Expanding Economic Collaborations Across Texas and the Region

PANELISTS

Moderator: Mr. Glenn Hamer
President and CEO, Texas Association of Business

Mr. Luis Rodriguez
President and CEO, San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce

The Hon. Marina Alderete Gavito
San Antonio Councilwoman, District 7

Mr. Carlos Serna
Deputy Secretary of Promotion and Innovation, Secretariat of Economy, State of Nuevo Leon, Mexico

Session Overview

South Central Texas (San Antonio/Austin) is a rapidly evolving innovation ecosystem and a key reason why Texas is the second fastest-growing economy in the United States. Drivers of economic development from across the state highlighted how Texas is expanding its regional innovation identity through a strategic vision, greater collaboration, and increased investment. The Interstate 35 corridor (that connects the St. Lawrence Seaway/Great Lakes to Mexico) is a backbone of innovation zones in Texas. Industry sectors including automotive, aerospace, chips, and food rely on this geographic artery for R&D and the movement of goods, services, and labor.

Key Session Insights

Mr. Glenn Hamer, President and CEO of the Texas Association of Business, opened the discussion by advocating for free trade, which he said is fundamentally good. "We try to make the case at the Chamber that trade is good." Texas' economy surpasses both Russia and Italy, and this achievement is driven by the gains that Texas has made from trading with Mexico. The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) has propelled Texas into a position as one of the country's leading economic powerhouses.

Mr. Luis Rodriguez, President and CEO of the San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, celebrated the economic power of the Hispanic community, stating, "Hispanic GDP is the 7th largest GDP according to the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce." He argued that the strength of Texas' trade with Mexico supports job creation and economic growth, making tariffs a direct threat to this region's productivity and prosperity. Sharing insights from his recent meeting with the Mexican ambassador, Mr. Rodriguez noted that U.S. trade

"The U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement has made Texas one of the leading economic engines in the country."

Mr. Glenn Hamer
President and CEO,Texas Association of Business

policies significantly impact both Mexico's and the United States' economic outlook. "The United States is not as successful without a partnership with Mexico."

Mr. Rodriguez pointed to the automobile manufacturing sector as a prime example of how the Texas-Mexico partnership drives productivity. He warned that any disruption to this partnership, such as the imposition of tariffs, would harm manufacturing industries reliant on efficient supply chains. Mr. Rodriguez also noted that U.S. trade with Mexico is particularly beneficial for small businesses, enabling them to expand their customer base and attract more bilingual clients. Furthermore, San Antonio Councilwoman Marina Alderete Gavito also spoke on the importance of collaboration between Texas and Mexico, stressing that San Antonio needs to take full advantage of this growing partnership. Leaders in both Texas and Mexico must continue to invest in infrastruc-

"The San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce is against tariffs because the trade between Texas and Mexico is very strong and creates many jobs."

Mr. Luis Rodriguez
President and CEO, San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce

"Tech, software, and remote work has no tariffs. This kind of work is a bed for our community to support Nuevo Leon's innovation ecosystem."

Mr. Carlos Serna
Deputy Secretary of Promotion and Innovation, Secretariat of Economy, State of Nuevo Leon, Mexico

ture and workforce development to ensure that both regions can effectively accommodate and capitalize on the expanding tech-driven economic relationship.

Mr. Hamer further reinforced the argument against tariffs by framing tariff-free trade as a patriotic approach that secures long-term economic prosperity. He warned that policies such as imposing a 25 percent tariff would cause havoc in the auto industry and severely disrupt supply chains. Beyond economic concerns, he argued that maintaining and expanding trade relationships with Mexico and Canada reduces U.S. dependence on China. Strengthening North American economic ties, he suggested, enhances national security and resilience in the face of great power competition.

Despite the benefits of free trade, tariffs are an increasingly likely reality. In the face of protectionist policy, how can the economies of Texas and Mexico continue to work together? The technology sector provides exciting opportunities for Texans and Mexicans that goes beyond borders and tariffs. Mr. Carlos Serna, Deputy Secretary of Promotion and Innovation and Secretariat of Economy for the State of Nuevo Leon, Mexico, pointed out that technology, software, and remote work are not subject to tariffs, making them key industries to continue Texas and Mexico's economic partnership in this new political reality. Nuevo Leon is committed to strengthening its relationship with Texas through investments in infrastructure, education, and programs that support the tech sector.

"We need to make sure San Antonio is an exciting place for this creative class of workers."

The Hon. Marina Alderete Gavito
San Antonio Councilwoman, District 7

"The tech industry can fly through the legal and political circumstances that affect other industries." According to Serna, intellectual and technological advancements are not constrained by traditional trade barriers.

Drawing upon Mr. Serna's discussion, Councilwoman Gavito argued that the tech industry not only has no borders, it is also accessible across all levels of society. While San Antonio continues to face challenges such as a high poverty rate, Councilwoman Gavito believes that coding and programming can act as an equalizer, offering individuals a chance to improve their lives. Learning coding, which can be done from home, provides an alternative pathway to good jobs, bypassing for some the need for a traditional college degree.

To harness the benefits of the tech industry for the San Antonio community, policymakers must ensure that communities have clear pathways to this industry. Councilwoman Gavito stressed that expanding internet access across San Antonio is critical to enabling more people to participate in the tech economy. Furthermore, investing in the local workforce is crucial, and leaders should take particularly care to ensure that that this tech talent pool is both diverse and inclusive. Drawing from her own experience as a woman in tech, Councilwoman Gavito advocated for equal access to training for both men and women, and pointed to institutions like the University of Texas at San Antonio as a major resource in ensuring tech skills are accessible for all.

To support San Antonio's burgeoning tech industry, the city must create an environment that both fosters and attracts talent. Crucially, Councilwoman Gavito advocated for the city to focus on attracting a "creative class of workers." As she defined it, creative workers are the ones who foster ideas that drive the technology sector, and these innovators not only drive the tech industry but also create numerous job opportunities in other sectors. A single tech worker, Councilwoman Gavito pointed out, can bring many other job opportunities with them from the demands created by a growing tech sector. A significant part of attracting talent and encouraging business activity is ensuring that the city can provide core services—from education to upskilling and retraining—while addressing issues like public safety and crime.

As the discussion concluded, the panelists reflected on the importance of maintaining and strengthening the Texas-Mexico relationship in the face of rising political tensions around free trade. While tariffs and protectionist policies create challenges, there are still abundant opportunities to build on this partnership, particularly through the tech sector. Looking ahead, both Texas and Mexico must invest in their infrastructure, workforce, and innovation to ensure this relationship continues to thrive, delivering prosperity and stability to

LUNCH KEYNOTE

Ms. Jenna Saucedo-Herrera, President and CEO, Greater: SATX

Ms. Jenna Saucedo-Herrera
President and CEO, Greater: SATX

Key Session Insights

In her keynote address, Ms. Jenna Saucedo-Herrera, President and CEO of Greater: SATX, described how San Antonio's economic success is built on a foundation of vision, investment, and collaboration. Texas, as the eighth largest economy in the world—surpassing Russia, Italy, and Canada—has become a tremendous location for business, attracting numerous corporate headquarters. With 16 R1 universities, Texas leads the nation in top-tier research institutions, surpassing California's 11. State lawmakers continue to fuel this growth through initiatives like the Texas CHIPS Act, which has led to the creation of the Texas Semiconductor Consortium. The significant investments from companies like Samsung demonstrate Texas' commitment to strengthening domestic semiconductor production and reducing reliance on foreign supply chains.

Beyond semiconductors, Texas is poised to become a leader in the space economy. The University of Texas is playing a major role in advancing space research and development. At the end of 2024, launching its Center for Space Technology and Operations Research, which is focused on space missions between Earth and the moon. Besides public and academic research, Texas has also become the home of the booming private sector space industry.

Although Texas is making significant traction in these crucial industries, to sustain these economic developments, the state must engage in large-scale infrastructure investments. The global economy's rapid evolution demands massive financial commitments, and Texas is one of the few states prepared to keep pace. Strategic investment in infrastructure will be crucial in maintaining and attracting industries of the future. These infrastructure developments must take advantadge of San Antonio's strategic

location in central Texas and its proximity to Mexico. The region's seamless connectivity network fuels its economy, and by aligning infrastructure efforts, the corridor from Austin through San Antonio to northern Mexico is becoming one of the most dynamic innovation ecosystems in the world.

A key factor in Texas' success is its focus on people and place. San Antonio has become a net producer of talent, contributing significantly to Texas' leadership in educating first-generation college students. Additionally, the state recognizes the importance of expanding its energy grid beyond traditional sources. Renewable energy, including wind, solar, and nuclear power, is essential to meeting the state's growing demands. CPS Energy has played a crucial role in this transition, with the average power requirement in San Antonio's project pipeline increasing from 8 megawatts to 40 megawatts over the past three years. As AI, quantum computing, data centers, and battery manufacturing drive further demand, energy consumption in Texas could increase by 50 percent by 2030. Ensuring capacity, timing, and transmission build-out is a priority for the region, as doing so is vital for sustaining its economic momentum.

Water resilience is another critical component of San Antonio's economic strategy. Unlike power capacity, water infrastructure cannot be expanded at will, making efficient management essential. The San Antonio Water System has become a national model, supplying water to over 200,000 households while maintaining city ownership to prevent profit-driven resource exploitation. This structure also generates revenues for the city, which CPS Energy reinvests back into the communities it serves.

San Antonio's military history is another advantage for the region, as it is deeply intertwined with its economic ecosystem. Joint Base San Antonio is the region's largest employer, and it fosters research and innovation in both the public and private sectors. As modern warfare increasingly relies on biological and cyber technologies, San Antonio's intelligence and research capabilities are preparing the United States for future conflicts.

> "Texas is momentum. San Antonio is the fastest growing city, in the fastest growing state in the country. And there's a reason for that."
>
> **Ms. Jenna Saucedo-Herrera**
> President and CEO, Greater: SATX

Wrapping up her keynote, Ms. Saucedo-Herrera focused on how—with access to the North American market—San Antonio serves as a gateway for global commerce, making it a launchpad for investment. The city and state are well-positioned to seize emerging opportunities and solidify their role in shaping the future. Forums like the Competitiveness Conversations play a vital role in fostering collaboration, ensuring that San Antonio remains at the forefront of economic growth and innovation.

PANEL

Leveling Up Texas Talent: Building an Unmatched Tech Workforce

PANELISTS

Moderator: Mr. Joe Sanchez
Executive Director and Secretary of the Board, Cyber Texas Foundation

Dr. Heather Shipley
Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs, University of Texas at San Antonio

Dr. David Garza
President, Tec de Monterrey

Mr. Dean Gefen
CEO, NukuDo

Session Overview

As industries evolve, so too must the educational institutions responsible for preparing the next generation of workers. The panel discussion explored how universities can better align with industry needs, expand access to training programs, and equip students—both traditional and non-traditional—with the skills necessary to thrive in an uncertain future.

Key Session Insights

Students today will graduate into a world where they will work with technologies yet to be invented, in jobs yet to exist, and solving problems yet be recognized—that's a key point made Dr. David Garza, President of Tec de Monterrey, teeing up the conversation. In other words, the need for educational institutions to prepare students for an unpredictable job market is complicated by the accelerating pace of technological change. In this context, universities must go beyond traditional skill-based training and focus on developing adaptability. What skills will enable graduates to navigate these evolving conditions? How can universities and communities build a resilient workforce?

In the panel's view, the ability to respond to shifting job markets and embrace new opportunities will define career longevity in an uncertain future.

Building on this idea, Mr. Joe Sanchez, Executive Director and Secretary of the Board for the Cyber Texas Foundation, broadened the conversation by highlighting the significance of "power skills," what others often refer to as "soft skills," which go beyond technical expertise. He argued that in an increasingly dynamic world, employers are placing greater value on abilities such as critical thinking, communication, and adaptability. These skills allow employees to remain effective despite technological disruptions or industry shifts, making them indispensable in the modern workforce. Having the competency to be durable, flexible, and willing to continuously learn will ensure students are prepared for their first jobs and also capable of growing and evolving throughout their careers.

"Technology is advancing so fast, when the students graduate, they will use technologies that have not been invented yet, work in jobs that do not exist yet, and solve problems we do not even know are problems yet."

Dr. David Garza
President, Tec de Monterrey

Just as students need to be prepared to enter a world of rapid innovation, current workers need to be prepared to adapt and change in a technologically turbulent world. As industries evolve, many workers find themselves equipped with outdated skills, creating a widening gap between available jobs and workforce capabilities. To bridge this divide, panelists explored innovative employee retraining programs, the shift toward skills-based hiring, and the importance of legitimizing alternative education pathways.

"Power skills, or what others call soft skills, are beyond the technology. Soft skills are crucial to a changing world."

Mr. Joe Sanchez
Executive Director and Secretary of the Board, Cyber Texas Foundation

"NukuDo's training is a win for both students and employers. Students can get the training they need for the cybersecurity workforce and employers get access to talented cybersecurity workers without risk."

Mr. Dean Gefen
CEO, NukuDo

In fact, as Dr. Garza pointed out, industries are increasingly prioritizing practical skills over formal degrees, yet societal perceptions of education have not fully caught up with this transition. While not everyone can or should attend university, alternative education models still face cultural stigma in certain regions. In Mexico, for example, vocational training is often seen as a lesser path compared to university education. Rethinking traditional education models is essential to accommodating a diverse range of learners and ensuring that workforce training aligns with industry needs. One such initiative is Tec de Monterrey's "Learning for the Future" initiative, a continuous education program designed to help learners keep pace with technological advancements throughout their careers.

Mr. Dean Gefen, CEO of NukuDo, provided another example. His company addresses the challenge of training or reskilling workers for today's job market by helping transition workers from declining industries into emerging fields quickly and cost-effectively. Drawing from his experience training soldiers in Israel for cybersecurity through the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Mr. Gefen pointed out that targeted, skills-based programs can rapidly equip individuals with highly sought-after expertise. In this way, high school graduates can quickly be trained for crucial industries such as cybersecurity without completing a four-year degree.

In NukuDo's cybersecurity training model, for example, students apply, and receive hands-on training that's paid for by NukuDo. Students are then directly placed with employers. This structure not only provides job seekers with in-demand

"Data and AI credentials are not only for STEM, but for social sciences and humanity. We want to ensure all of our students have this opportunity to develop their skill sets and be competitive in the workforce."

Dr. Heather Shipley
Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs, University of Texas at San Antonio

skills but also relieves businesses of the financial burden of training new employees. Additionally, Mr. Gefen noted that in cybersecurity, local talent is often preferable to offshore workers due to national security concerns.

Dr. Heather Shipley, Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs for The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), then shared how UTSA is expanding access to industry-relevant skills beyond the traditional STEM pipeline. Recognizing that technology is reshaping every field—from social sciences to the humanities—UTSA is broadening its credentialing programs to equip students across disciplines with practical expertise in AI, data science, and other emerging technologies. These programs are designed for both traditional students and adult learners looking to reskill, ensuring a wider range of individuals can adapt to the demands of a changing job market. To further bridge the gap between education and industry, UTSA is fostering interdisciplinary collaboration through new campus spaces that encourage hands-on learning and real-world problem-solving, as well as working closely with Tec de Monterrey to exchange best practices for skills-based learning across the broader South Texas region.

The need to align workforce skills with industry demands is particularly essential for industries that protect America's critical systems. With the demand for cybersecurity professionals growing faster than the supply, Mr. Sanchez stressed, "What we need more of is workforce." One way of getting more workers into these crucial industries is to get them interested in it at an early age. He pointed out that UTSA has developed a cyber defender card game to introduce young people to cybersecurity concepts and spark their interest in the field.

Besides teaching students the skills relevant to industry, it is also critical that students are given exposure to the types of problems they will encounter in the working world. Dr. Garza shared how Tec de Monterrey's academic model has incorporated a balance between lecture-based learning and challenge-based learning. Since 2019, their "Tec 21" model has incorporated a fifty/fifty mix of traditional lectures and hands-on, real-world projects, allowing students to collaborate directly with industry partners. Dr. Garza noted that Tec de Monterrey will be integrating AI into all its programs by next year, a goal that aligns with UTSA's focus on ensuring that all students gain exposure to AI and data science.

The common thread through the innovative training programs discussed by the panelists is they are driven by strong partnerships between educational institutions and industry leaders. Both UTSA and Tec de Monterrey work to closely collaborate with industry partners and the community, which helps integrate real-world experience into student education. By working together, universities and industries can help ensure that students are equipped with the skills necessary to succeed in the evolving job market.

Workforce development is not just about teaching technical skills—it is about fostering resilience, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. Institutions must rethink traditional education models, embrace alternative credentialing programs, and create direct pipelines to employment. Whether through hands-on learning, skills-based hiring, or innovative retraining initiatives, the future of workforce readiness depends on strong partnerships between academia, industry, and policymakers. By working together, these stakeholders can ensure that students—regardless of their background or field of study—are prepared to meet the challenges of an ever-changing job market.

CYBERSECURITY TECH TALK

Protecting Critical Infrastructure in Our Connected World

Mr. Victor Murray
Assistant Director, High Reliability Systems Division, Southwest Research Institute

Key Session Insights

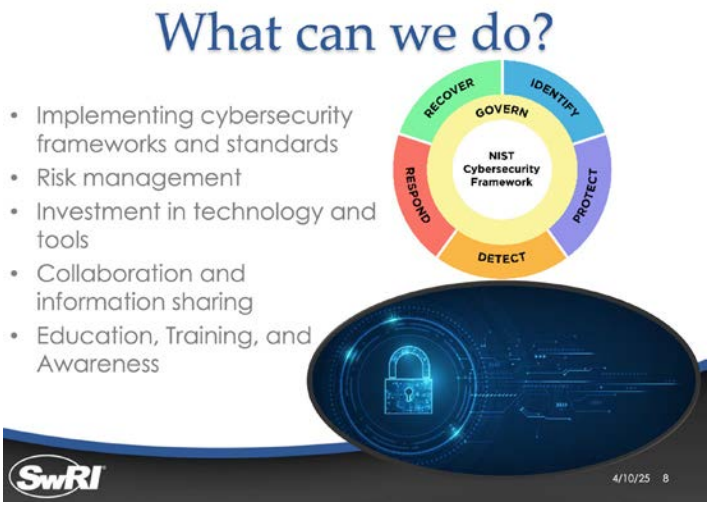
In his Tech Talk, Mr. Victor Murray, Assistant Director of the High Reliability Systems Division at Southwest Research Institute, provided an in-depth discussion on cybersecurity threats, real-world incidents, and best practices for risk management in safeguarding critical infrastructure.

Mr. Murray began with an argument: cybersecurity requires a risk management approach rather than striving for an unattainable completely secure system. He explained that cyber incidents often arise due to access vulnerabilities and user errors, which can have severe consequences. To illustrate the impact of human error, he recounted an incident where a single mistake led to a recovery effort spanning seven months, demonstrating the critical need for vigilance in cybersecurity practices.

Expanding on the motivations behind cyberattacks, Mr. Murray categorized them into financial gain and geopolitical objectives. Ransomware attacks, aimed at extorting money, have become increasingly prevalent. He cited the ransomware attack on the Colonial Pipeline's billing system, which led to a five-day operational halt, a fuel shortage on the East Coast, and a

"Risk management is how everybody should be managing their cybersecurity. There is no such thing as a completely secure system."

Mr. Victor Murray
Assistant Director, High Reliability Systems Division, Southwest Research Institute



ransom payment exceeding four million dollars, though approximately two million dollars were recovered.

Further illustrating the ramifications of cyberattacks, Mr. Murray discussed how cyberattacks can be leveraged as tools of warfare, influencing national security operations in ways previously unseen. A powerful example of this tactic was the coordinated cyberattack on Viasat, a U.S. communications company, on the eve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. By exploiting weaknesses in network management, attackers wiped router firmware and caused a denial-of-service attack. This incident resulted in a significant internet outage over Eastern Europe, disrupting Ukrainian military communications during the invasion.

Given the increasing frequency and complexity of cyber threats, Mr. Murray stressed the importance of cybersecurity beyond just operational concerns. Protecting critical infrastructure is vital for ensuring regulatory compliance, maintaining economic stability, preserving public safety and trust, and strengthening resilience against cyberterrorism.

To effectively combat cyber threats, a multi-layered approach is necessary. Detection mechanisms, adherence to established frameworks and standards—such as those developed by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST)—and, most crucially, effective risk management are key components of a strong cybersecurity strategy. Mr. Murray reiterated that "risk management is how everybody should be managing their cybersecurity," reinforcing the notion that no system can be completely secure. Collaboration and information sharing are also crucial to cybersecurity, as timely communication can be instrumental in mitigating cyber threats before they escalate.

In his final remarks, Mr. Murray made clear cybersecurity is not just a technical issue but a fundamental aspect of national and economic security in an increasingly interconnected world.

PANEL

Investors in Innovation—Financing Texas' Innovation Economy

PANELISTS

Moderator: Mr. Aaron Demerson
President and CEO, Texas Economic Development Corporation

Dr. Gilroy Vandentop
Vice President, Corporate University Research, Intel Labs

Ms. Korry Castillo
Associate Deputy Comptroller, Office of Texas Comptroller

Mr. Sebastian Garzon
Executive Director, Alamo Angels

Session Overview

Consistent and reliable capital is the lifeblood of commercializing and scaling innovation, be it critical infrastructure security (CIS), cybersecurity, or any other tech-driven sector. In this session, leaders of some of Texas' leading innovation investors highlighted how they are providing the backing needed to kickstart a new wave of technology growth in the state, and opportunities that would expand innovation investment even further.

Key Session Insights

Texas has established itself as a premier destination for business investment, not by leading with incentives, but by cultivating a favorable economic environment. Mr. Aaron Demerson, President and CEO of the Texas Economic Development Corporation, claimed that the state's success stems from a combination of workforce development, economic policies, and education. The factors have helped Texas maintain its reputation as a pro-business state while fostering innovation and long-term investment.

Building on this idea, Ms. Korry Castillo, Associate Deputy Comptroller of the Texas Comptroller's Office, provided a more detailed look at the specific factors that contribute to the state's attractiveness. **Texas' tax structure, licensing policies, and workforce training programs play a significant role in bringing companies to the state.** While financial incentives are available, they are only one part of a broader effort to support firms as they establish operations.

Beyond policy and infrastructure, financial commitment is another essential factor in Texas' successful innovation hub. Dr. Gilroy Vandentop, Vice President of Intel Labs, stressed that it is not enough for a state to claim it supports business—there must also be tangible investment behind it. "Everyone

"In Texas we do not lead with incentives to attract business. We lead with our favorable business climate."

Mr. Aaron Demerson
President and CEO, Texas Economic Development Corporation

can talk about a business-enabling landscape, but having money saved for investments is key," he noted. Texas' ability to allocate funds specifically for economic development creates a competitive advantage, allowing the state to support industries like technology and manufacturing.

In addition to financial backing, the broader economic landscape plays a crucial role in attracting businesses. Mr. Sebastian Garzon, Executive Director of Alamo Angels, pointed out that Texas benefits from a lower cost of living compared to high-cost innovation hubs like New York and Silicon Valley. This affordability has become even more relevant in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which demonstrated that businesses can operate remotely while still accessing top-tier talent and resources. As a result, Texas has emerged as a viable alternative for startups and corporations looking to

"If a university is looking for corporate investment for their research, they need to start early. We expect to be collaborators before we become investors."

Dr. Gilroy Vandentop
Vice President, Corporate University Research Intel Labs

maximize their operational efficiency without the burden of exorbitant overhead costs.

While creating a pro-business environment creates the potential for private sector innovation, this potential is made more impactful when leveraged with the resources of academia and the government. Such partnerships are a key ingredient of innovation. **However for investments in innovative enterprises to succeed, it is crucial that all stakeholders become involved early. Dr. Gilroy Vandentop pointed out that companies expect to be collaborators before they can become investors.** A major challenge in these collaborations is the issue of intellectual property (IP) ownership, as universities and companies often struggle to reach agreements on IP rights. To resolve this, Dr. Vandentop proposed the creation of a state-wide master collaboration agreement that universities could adopt. Such an agreement would provide a standardized framework for companies and universities to engage more easily, helping to overcome the complexities of IP ownership and facilitating smoother partnerships.

Similarly, Mr. Garzon also advocated for a more active role of venture capitalists in innovation. Modern investors must be actively involved in the development of the companies they support to ensure they grow and reach their potential. Mr. Garzon explained that the role of investors goes beyond just providing capital, but also extends to mentorship, strategic guidance, and resource-sharing. Furthermore, investors should extent their collaboration not just to innovators, but to the wider venture capitalist network. Texas already has a robust network of angel investors, but Mr. Garzon noted that these networks could significantly improve their impact through greater collaboration. Co-investment opportunities, where multiple investors contribute to a single startup, are a crucial mechanism for scaling young companies and ensuring they receive the support needed to thrive. To maximize investment success, Mr. Garzon outlined three key priorities: leveraging Texas' existing entrepreneurial ecosystem, fostering collaboration among investors to accelerate startup growth, and improving education on venture capital for all stakeholders.

Building on the importance of collaboration for innovation, Ms. Castillo discussed the role of government in supporting innovation and ensuring that public-private partnerships thrive. The Texas Legislature works to avoid policies that could inhibit investment, aiming to create an environment where businesses can flourish. She noted that early collaboration between investors and the government is crucial for adjusting policies in ways that can help sustain investment and growth. To show the active role Texas'

"As investors, it is not just about writing these companies a check, but also supporting them beyond that."

Mr. Sebastian Garzon
Executive Director, Alamo Angels

"In order to run a typical data center, there is an extremely high amount of water usage. Every 100 word email for an AI to write is the equivalent of a bottle of water."

Ms. Korry Castillo
Associate Deputy Comptroller, Office of Texas Comptroller

government is playing in the state's innovation ecosystem, Ms. Castillo discussed two key government initiatives: Governor Abbott's creation of the Texas Cyber Command in San Antonio, which aims to support and strengthen the state's cybersecurity ecosystem, and the establishment of the Texas Broadband Development Office, designed to improve digital infrastructure and further enable innovation.

Although Texas has made tremendous progress in developing its digital infrastructure for innovation, it is faced with the challenge of ensuring its critical infrastructure for resource management, namely power and water, are suited to fit the growing demands of emerging technology. Ms. Castillo brought this issue to light by discussing the substantial water demands associated with data centers, which are essential for running technologies like AI. Texas has made strides in various areas of economic development and water infrastructure is a critical issue for the state's future. As Texas looks to attract more innovation-driven investment, Ms. Castillo stressed that regions with a robust infrastructure system to support the demands of resource intensive technology will be more likely to succeed. Investors prioritize these areas when deciding where to allocate resources, making it even more important for Texas to address these challenges.

Building on Ms. Castillo's point, Dr. Vandentop further delved into the growing energy demands driven by technological advancements. He explained that as technology progresses—especially in sectors like AI and data centers—energy

consumption has increased dramatically. With both energy and water being key resources for innovation, managing these infrastructure challenges will be crucial to Texas' ability to maintain its competitive edge in the tech sector.

Despite these aforementioned challenges, Texas stands at a pivotal moment in its economic evolution, with emerging industries like space technology and artificial intelligence poised to shape the future of the state and the country. By cultivating a strong investment ecosystem, attracting top talent, and fostering an environment where emerging industries can thrive, Texas has the potential to become a major hub for cutting-edge advancements. The challenge now is ensuring the state can adapt to these changes and seize the opportunities that lie ahead. As succinctly put by Mr. Garzon, "venture capitalists, rather than thinking about what could go wrong, like to focus on what could go right."

PANEL

Mapping the Enabling Conditions for Texas' Competitiveness Strategy for the Next 25 Years

PANELISTS

Moderator: Mr. Drew Scheberle
Executive Director, National Security Innovation Council

Dr. David Brown
Executive Director, National Security Collaboration Center (NSCC), University of Texas at San Antonio

Mr. Brad Morrison
Board of Directors, Texas Space Commission

Mr. AJ Rodriguez
Executive Vice President, Texas 2036

Session Overview

Pulling from insights gathered throughout the Texas Competitiveness Conversation, leaders from across the region examined the enabling conditions essential for the state's competitiveness strategy over the next 25 years, including the intersection of policy, infrastructure, education, innovation, and workforce development.

Key Session Insights

Texas is rapidly solidifying its reputation as a premier destination for business and innovation, attracting companies and talent from across the country. Mr. Brad Morrison, Member of the Board of Directors for the Texas Space Commission, captured this momentum succinctly, stating, "The center of our country is moving to Texas." The state's business-friendly policies, welcoming economic climate, and strong collaborative spirit have created an environment where organizations can thrive.

"The collegial nature of Texas is amazing. People are kind hearted, work together, and all are part of the Texas team."

Dr. David Brown
Executive Director, National Security Collaboration Center (NSCC), University of Texas at San Antonio

A central pillar of Texas' innovation ecosystem is its culture of collaboration—an economic environment built on collegial relationships and partnerships. This distinction is one reason Texas has begun to overtake California in terms of its attractiveness to technology companies, but Dr. David Brown, Executive Director of the University of Texas at San Antonio's (UTSA) National Security Collaboration Center (NSCC), warned Texas should "not recreate the Silicon Valley model; it is not the model you want."

This sense of community that permeates Texas' economic environment has driven the rise of "patriotic capital," an influx of investment driven by confidence in the state's potential. Mr. Morrison described this phenomenon as a driving force behind major projects like the Texas Stock Exchange, which has the potential to attract substantial federal, state, and private capital. But investment alone is not enough; Texas must ensure its growth is focused and strategic. Too often, discussions about innovation lack direction, and as Dr. Brown noted, "We talk about innovation all the time, but it is often without focus." To avoid this pitfall, Texas must direct its innovative energy toward industries that will define its future. Mr. Morrison identified four key sectors leading this transformation: the space economy, semiconductors, small modular reactors (SMRs), and smart grids. Each of these industries represents not only an economic opportunity but a critical element of national security.

A strong commitment to national security is reinforcing Texas' economic leadership, particularly in cybersecurity, aerospace, and defense. Dr. Brown highlighted the extensive network of investors supporting defense-related projects, while also pointing to the potential estab-

"The great power conflict between the United States and China will not only be fought over cyber, but also in space."

Mr. Brad Morrison
Board of Directors, Texas Space Commission

"We need to create the environment to sustain the economic miracle that is Texas in the long term."

Mr. AJ Rodriguez
Executive Vice President, Texas 2036

lishment of a Texas Cyber Command, a move that would significantly enhance the state's cybersecurity capabilities. San Antonio is poised to play a pivotal role in these efforts, leveraging its military and intelligence resources to strengthen America's national security infrastructure. With the increasing militarization of space, ensuring a permanent U.S. presence in orbit will be critical, and Texas is uniquely positioned to contribute to this objective.

Texas' economic growth and national security efforts, however, cannot succeed without a strong workforce and modern infrastructure. Mr. AJ Rodriguez, Executive Vice President of Texas 2036, underscored the importance of workforce retention, noting that Texas has an 82 percent retention rate, an essential advantage as industries evolve. But as the state's population approaches 90 million, workforce development must keep pace with the demands of a rapidly changing economy. Infrastructure investment will be equally crucial, particularly in resource management and energy innovation. Among the most pressing infrastructure challenges are water security and energy resilience. **Mr. Rodriguez pointed out that Texas loses the equivalent of Lake Buchanan's worth of water (185 billion gallons) annually due to aging, deteriorating water infrastructure. He noted that a Texas 2036 study released last year identified a $2 billion economic impact cost to the state due to underinvestment in utility system infrastructure. Without a dedicated funding plan for renewing Texas' outdated water infrastructure, these losses threaten businesses and communities alike.** At the same time, Texas' energy grid must be modernized to meet growing demands, with smart grids playing a critical role in improving efficiency and resilience. With a substantial budget surplus, Texas has the resources

"The greatest threat to the Texas model is complacency."

Mr. Drew Scheberle
Executive Director, National Security Innovation Council

to make these strategic investments, but it is crucial these investments in workforce development and critical infrastructure are made to sustain Texas' economic engine.

As Texas continues its ascent, its leaders must remain proactive in shaping the state's future, and as Mr. Drew Scheberle, Executive Director of the National Security Innovation Council, pointed out, the state must not become complacent from its success. While Texas has already established itself as a leader in business, technology, and national security, its long-term success depends on strategic investments, modernizing critical infrastructure, and maintaining its culture of cooperation.

PANEL

Charting a Path Forward—Reflections on the Conversation from the Co-chairs

The Hon. Deborah L. Wince-Smith
President and CEO, Council on Competitiveness

Dr. Taylor Eighmy
President, University of Texas at San Antonio
Acting President, UT Health San Antonio

Key Discussion Points

Reflecting on the discussions throughout the Conversation, The Hon. Deborah L. Wince-Smith, President and CEO of the Council on Competitiveness, identified the key component of Texas' success: Texas is a state of builders. Ms. Wince-Smith outlined that society is made up of both builders and blockers. Builders are innovators and risk-takers, whereas blockers are those who impede progress. Texas has fewer blockers than many other regions, making the state's economic environment conducive to bold ideas and transformative projects. Texas' economy of builders has made it a stronghold of several industries crucial for America's innovation ecosystem. Dr. Taylor Eighmy, President of the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) and Acting President of UT Health San Antonio, pointed to Texas' leadership in multiple industries, including space, biosciences, and cyber, positions the state as a hub for cutting-edge technologies. This capacity for Texas to build is only possible because of its "institutional anchoring, geography, and investment," which Dr. Eighmy claims are the bedrock for Texas' innovation ecosystem.

Regarding Texas' geographic strengths, Dr. Eighmy stressed that Texas' proximity and relationship with Mexico has been essential to both regions' economic development. UTSA's partnership with Mexican University Monterey Tec is emblematic of the progress and prosperity generated by Texas and Mexico's cross-border partnerships. This partnership is particularly crucial in the face of China's meteoric rise to power. An alliance of the nations of North America, Dr. Eighmy suggests, will be essential to protecting the interests of the free world against China's illiberal and centralized political economy.

"There are two types of people: there are people who are builders and people who are blockers."

The Hon. Deborah Wince-Smith
President and CEO, Council on Competitiveness
National Commission Co-Chair

"China is a juggernaut beyond measure, and the sooner we organize in North America to prepare for that, the better off we will be."

Dr. Taylor Eighmy
President, University of Texas at San Antonio
Acting President, UT Health San Antonio

However, this relationship between the United States and its North American neighbors is being increasingly threatened by protectionist policies such as tariffs, which has harbored more economic competition as opposed to collaboration. In a radical proposal Ms. Wince-Smith proposed the complete removal of all tariffs around the world, setting the stage for a more prosperous and united world. The innovation corridor running through Mexico, Texas, and the other border states; is a powerful example to the world of the prosperity that international trade can bring to all its partners involved.

Despite the successes of Texas' economic model, the state must be prepared for the evolution of the United State's economic landscape. Dr. Eighmy believes that corporate and philanthropic research and development will become far more important components of an innovative economy. **In light of this evolution, Dr. Eighmy believes that Texas, and other states across the nation, must be prepared to adapt their ecosystems to a new world driven by the private sector.** As he notes, the Council on Competitiveness will be a crucial guide for innovators across Texas and the United States to this new economic landscape. **To this point, Council CEO Ms. Wince-Smith called for stronger private sector leadership on issues of economic competitiveness.** Private sector leaders must no longer focus purely on the interest of their own firms, but should look to serve the interests of the nation as well.

To close the Conversation, Council CEO Ms. Wince-Smith honored Dr. Eighmy with the U.S. Competitiveness Award in recognition of his exceptional leadership. Under Dr. Eighmy's

careful stewardship, UTSA achieved record graduation numbers, expanded its research initiatives, and strengthened its connection to the broader community. Dr. Eighmy's efforts to integrate the University with downtown San Antonio, exemplified by the creation of the San Pedro block—the Conversation's venue—have significantly enhanced the city's activity and productivity. Dr. Eighmy's leadership does not end in in San Antonio but also extends to the national stage. As part of the Council, Dr. Eighmy has served as both a Council Member and National Commissioner where he has advanced initiatives to expand the nation's competitiveness agenda, particularly through placemaking innovation and public-private partnerships. Ms. Wince-Smith provided special attention to the instrumental role Dr. Eighmy played at The University of Tennessee in securing the Institute for Advanced Composites Manufacturing Innovation, a $259 million public-private partnership backed by the U.S. Department of Energy. Concluding, Ms. Wince-Smith thanked Dr. Eighmy for his contributions to Texas' competitiveness and for hosting an enlightening and productive Conversation.

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About the Council on Competitiveness

For nearly four decades, the Council on Competitiveness (Council) has championed a competitiveness agenda for the United States to attract investment and talent, and spur the commercialization of new ideas.

While the players may have changed since its founding in 1986, the mission remains as vital as ever—to enhance U.S. productivity and raise the standard of living for all Americans.

The members of the Council—CEOs, university presidents, labor leaders and national laboratory directors—represent a powerful, nonpartisan voice that sets aside politics and seeks results. By providing real-world perspective to Washington policymakers, the Council's private sector network makes an impact on decision-making across a broad spectrum of issues—from the cutting-edge of science and technology, to the democratization of innovation, to the shift from energy weakness to strength that supports the growing renaissance in U.S. manufacturing.

The Council's leadership group firmly believes that with the right policies, the strengths and potential of the U.S. economy far outweigh the current challenges the nation faces on the path to higher growth and greater opportunity for all Americans.