



## Trump's wall would be hard to build – even if Mexico pays

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TUCSON, ARIZ. — The details of Donald Trump’s plan to build a wall along the United States-Mexico border – and have Mexico pay for it – have come to light.

They point to a billionaire confident in his abilities to work the “art of the deal” in his favor. But history shows that building a wall on the border – no matter who pays for it – is a daunting prospect.

Mr. Trump’s plan, reported by The Washington Post, is to cut off the money sent to Mexico by people living in America – a figure estimated to be as much as \$25 billion a year – unless Mexico agrees to make a one-time payment of \$5 billion to \$10 billion. He would need to change the USA Patriot act to do this – a move some experts say is legally dicey.

The international boundary stretching through cities, deserts, mountains, and rivers remains mostly imaginary not solely because of a lack of will-power, but because of the challenges inherent in building a wall in a place once described as “unbroken waste, barren, wild.” Previous efforts have run headlong into land-rights disputes, protests over human rights, and the practical reality of barriers that were dug under, climbed over, or cut through.

The value of the wall, some experts say, is much more as a political idea than an actual structure. The border wall remains a powerful symbol for people on both sides of the immigration debate – either as a sign of security taken seriously or of fear and misunderstanding run amok.

“It’s something that has gained a lot of political value, the idea that you can wall the United states off from the rest of the rest of the world, particularly in this case, Mexico,” says Rachel St. John, author of “Line in the Sand: A History of the U.S.-Mexico Border.”

Currently, a patchwork of metal posts and fencing intended to deter pedestrians and cars covers some 650 miles. In the recent past, Sen. John McCain (R) of Arizona has pushed to “complete the dang fence.” In 2011, GOP presidential candidate Herman Cain caused an uproar when he proposed building an electrified border fence.

Talk of a border wall gained strength in the 1990s, in particular, says Professor St. John. That decade brought a new focus to the then-rising flow of illegal immigration, as well as the federal strategies to halt it. Through much of the '90s, more than 1 million people were caught trying to sneak across the border spanning Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas each year. The events of 9/11 brought heightened concern about security to the debate.

But primarily, the prospect of a mammoth wall on the southern border serves to ease anxiety over immigration, says Kenneth Madsen, a professor at Ohio State University at Newark who has studied the US-Mexico border.

“Barriers are tangible and highly visible manifestations that something is being done,” he says. “Whether effective or not is a whole other issue.”

One major question is how the federal government would acquire the land needed to build the wall. Some 480 homeowners either sold their land voluntarily or had it taken by eminent domain to build the 650 miles of fence mandated by Congress in 2006's Secure Fence Act, according to the Government Accountability Office.

"That means that if Trump's plan to build another 1,000 miles of wall is carried to fruition, thousands more homeowners will see their property destroyed or partially walled-off," Randal John Meyer, a legal associate for the Cato Institute, wrote in the Daily Beast. "The fence built so far goes extends to Texas, which ... means it mostly covers land that was already federally owned. Trump's new fencing would be built primarily on state-owned and private lands."

Originally, when the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the 1853 Gadsden Purchase defined the southern border, the illegal movement of people was of no concern to those who set out to mark the boundary line with stone monuments.

### **'One unbroken waste'**

So desolate was the area that John R. Bartlett, member of a US-Mexico commission tasked with demarcating the border in the early 1850s, wrote: “As far as the eye can reach stretches one unbroken waste, barren, wild, worthless.”

The geographical accuracy of some of the 258 monuments is still disputed. That has happened to modern-day markers, too. In 2007, Customs and Border Protection revealed that a 1.5-mile barrier meant to deter illegal car incursions in New Mexico was mistakenly built in Mexico.

The federal government built the first border fencing early in the 20th century to keep out Mexican cattle and potential animal disease. More fences went up after the decade-long Mexican Revolution of 1910 that brought to the border rising tensions over violence. Permanent barriers split towns like Nogales, Ariz., and Nogales, Mexico, into two and decisively ended what had been a relatively free back-and-forth movement of people.

“One thing we can see that even when the fences go in for reasons that people think are going to be beneficial, they often prove to be very divisive,” St. John says. Like the Berlin Wall in Germany, border fences became symbols of division, she says, “and it's partly why they are appealing to some people or offensive to others.”

Over the decades, as restrictions on US immigration tightened, the physical border drew more attention. By 1978, plans to build a fence along El Paso, Texas, caused critics to charge that the barrier could physically harm border crossers. “They wanted to put these razor-type barriers at the very top and there were a lot of protests over that,” recalls Oscar Martinez, a history professor at the University of Arizona in Tucson who lived in El Paso during the controversy.

The so-called “tortilla curtain” was replaced by a chain-link fence that was cut frequently and proved ineffective in keeping people out, the professor recalls. After the barriers went up in El Paso and San Diego, illegal border crossings continued to escalate.

To counter the high numbers, immigration authorities in the early 1990s implemented a strategy in El Paso that elongated existing fences with border agents positioned close together around the clock. In San Diego, new fencing went up and more border agents arrived. The tactics shifted migrants to remote, unpatrolled stretches of the border, including the Arizona desert. Migrant deaths, mostly due to exposure, became a byproduct.

### **New fences, new challenges**

Efforts to fortify barriers have since taken new forms – and run into new challenges.

In 2006, a Republican Congress passed the Secure Fence Act, which mandated 652 miles of double-layered, reinforced fencing. But a year later, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) argued that such a fence was overkill and wanted to have the discretion to determine what kind of fence to build where. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchinson (R) of Texas pushed through an amendment to give DHS that authority.

The result is that virtually all of the 652 miles of fencing have been built, but only 36 miles are double-layered ([see here](#)). The majority is single layer pedestrian fencing ([see here](#)) and vehicle barriers ([see here](#)) that pedestrians can fairly easily climb over.

The barriers cooled relations between the US and Mexico, angered environmentalists worried about wildlife impact, and sent to court landowners fighting to stop government takeover of private property on the border. Smugglers of people and drugs sliced through fencing with blow torches, dug tunnels under it, and flew ultralight planes over it.

Meanwhile, Arizona’s virtual wall of cameras, radars, and sensors known as SBInet was deemed a failure and scrapped in 2011. By then, it had cost taxpayers \$1 billion. That same year, a flash flood in the state washed away a 40-foot section of a 5.2-mile mesh fence that cost about \$21.3 million to build.

Given the problematic history of the existing fencing, Professor Martinez questions the feasibility of building a wall that spans all or most of the border.

“They’re not going to build this wall that people have in mind, like the Great Wall of China,” says Martinez. “That’s not going to happen, but I can see expansion of existing walls.”

Ultimately, he sees the issue as a political one. “Politicians are going to continue using this issue, they’re going to exploit it to get votes.”