



\$5 billion question: How border-security experts would spend money Trump wants for a wall

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It's a classic standoff: President Donald Trump wants \$5 billion for a border wall, the centerpiece of his campaign. Democrats in Congress refuse to authorize money for a barrier they view as unnecessary.

So most of the U.S. government has shut down for two weeks.

The best hope for a breakthrough appears to be a compromise in which Congress allocates a bundle for border security, but with restrictions blocking the erection of a solid, 30-foot-high barrier coveted by the president.

With that in mind, the USA TODAY Network asked homeland-security experts a simple question: What would you do with \$5 billion if Congress handed it to you and said, "Put this money to the best possible use for border security."

Should it be barriers? More border agents? Surveillance technology? Something else?

These are answers from a cross-section of authorities.

Andrew Selee, president, Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan research center in Washington, D.C.

"This will be fun," Selee begins. "Nobody's ever asked me to spend \$5 billion before."

His No. 1 priority would be pouring money into U.S. Immigration Courts and asylum officers, a refrain echoed by many of the experts.

About 92,000 migrants sought asylum along the Southwest border in 2018, creating a backlog that is unfair to those with legitimate claims.

Selee also would add inspectors and surveillance equipment at Southwest ports of entry "because that's where most of the hard drugs are coming through, and it is where the greatest threat of terrorist infiltration exists."

Finally, Selee says, he'd use additional money for fencing — maybe even a wall in strategic locations.

"I'm not allergic to the notion of a wall," he says. "I just don't think it's needed in most places."

James R. Phelps, co-author "Border Security," a 2014 book on the U.S.-Mexico line.

"There's a lot you could do with \$5 billion," Phelps says.

He would pour all of the money into fencing. Not necessarily a wall, he adds, but barriers that are difficult to scale and laid out in rows so trespassers would have to climb several.

There also needs to be surveillance cameras, motion sensors and Border Patrol agents backing up the fences.

Although some areas — Big Bend National Park and the deserts of southwest Arizona — don't need barriers, Phelps says fencing should be extended around San Diego and border towns in Texas and Arizona.

"Nothing will ever be 100 percent effective," he says. "But if you want to stop drugs and people, you've got to build a fence ... You need to spend a billion dollars on fences in high-traffic areas."

Tony Payan, director of Mexican Center at Baker Institute, a Rice University think tank.

Payan describes Trump's wall as "an almost absurd proposition" that would create a schism between neighbor nations.

He says Border Patrol staffing needs to grow, and money should be spent on equipment and surveillance technology. But, for the most part, the \$5 billion would be "best used on immigration courts that are now overwhelmed with asylum seekers."

Payan says any crisis or emergency on the border was spurred by a broken system for processing Central Americans who have surged to the United States as refugees.

A Government Accountability Office report in 2017 found U.S. Immigration Courts were clogged with more than 400,000 cases, and hearing delays of more than a year.

Payan says refugees, jammed in shelters on the Mexican side, grow so frustrated some decide to "make a run" at the border, either making it through illegally or getting arrested by agents so they can start the asylum process quicker.

Fixing that system "is a way of depressing their frustration...so they won't breach the border," he says.

Gil Kerlikowske, former U.S. Customs and Border Protection commissioner, now a professor at Northeastern University.

Kerlikowske says he'd spend about half the money on enhanced and updated technology — the so-called virtual fence that includes cameras, sensors, satellite and other surveillance.

The remaining \$2.5 billion would go toward barriers in high-traffic zones. That would include replacement fencing where old structures are failing or inadequate, plus some new barriers.

Kerlikowske says the Rio Grande River Valley presents a huge complication because barriers may have to be erected up to a mile from the border/river, and because it would require condemnation of private property. Previous efforts have been costly and stirred a political backlash.

At the same time, he says, barriers create major environmental problems and a humanitarian concern that fences force migrants to cross through remote deserts, where some die.

"We want a clean, quick and simple answer," Kerlikowske notes. "But, as (essayist) H.L. Mencken said, 'That's probably a wrong answer.'"

David J. Danelo, author of "The Border: Exploring the U.S.-Mexico Divide," and a senior fellow at Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

"Since the President claims the increase in asylum seekers represents the security threat," Danelo says via email, "\$5 billion would be more than enough to provide for immigration staffers to process and screen asylum claims and secure any facilities necessary to assist."

Danelo's second priority would be to increase the number of inspectors at land, air and sea ports. Additional Border Patrol agents and infrastructure would be last on his list.

Alex Nowrasteh, immigration analyst at CATO Institute, a libertarian think tank.

Nowrasteh says much of the \$5 billion should go to hiring more agents and building facilities for asylum seekers. Like Payan, he says that would eliminate chaos and free border agents to provide security.

"They could line up outside ports of entry and come through orderly," he says. "That makes it a lot easier, a lot cheaper and it removes the criminal threat."

(Note: Customs and Border Protection is struggling to hire an additional 7,500 agents over the next five years, despite funding that already has been authorized by Congress.)

Nowrasteh concedes that expediting the asylum system might encourage even more migration. However, he adds, "These people are already asking. They're breaking in. It's much better for it to happen through the front door."