



Experts: Pricetag for border wall likely to balloon with hidden costs

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President Donald Trump's request for \$5.7 billion from Congress to build a wall along the Mexico border does not include many costs -- including maintenance -- that could greatly inflate the pricetag, experts told UPI.

"People aren't paying attention to the dollars and cents. They are just paying attention to whether they want it or not politically, and the cost to the taxpayers is irrelevant to them," said Alex Nowrasteh, senior immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian-leaning think tank in Washington, D.C.

In 2017, the Department of Homeland Security estimated it would cost \$17.3 million per mile to build a border wall. In January, the White House's Office of Management and Budget told Congress constructing a new wall over 234 miles would cost about \$5.7 billion, or \$24.4 million per mile.

"The defining feature of a government mega-project is they always cost more than their proponents say they will," Nowrasteh said, referring to "mega-project" as those costing more than \$1 billion. He calls the border wall a "boondoggle."

Nowrasteh estimated the wall likely would cost \$59.8 billion to construct, more than 10 times the Trump administration's current estimate. He built into his calculations a 50 percent cost overrun, which he calls conservative.

Cato research on large government projects says cost overruns are "pervasive." The Boston Big Dig -- reconstruction of roads and tunnels -- was projected to cost \$2.6 billion in 1985, but ended up costing \$14.6 billion 20 years later, with one of its major contractors accused of criminal negligence, forcing it into bankruptcy. Similarly, the cleanup of the Hanford nuclear waste site in Washington state was projected to cost \$2 billion in 2000, but the final pricetag came in at \$13.4 billion in 2012, notwithstanding federal budget cuts.

"Even with a small cost overrun estimate, the wall doesn't make economic or financial sense," Nowrasteh said. "The entire notion of a border wall should be set aside because it is much more costly than people give it credit for. The border wall's effects will be negative and the politics that stops that is probably in the long-run interests of the United States."

The Government Accountability Office has a lengthy track record of trying to measure the value to the U.S. taxpayer of the existing tactical infrastructure on the southern border. In recent years, it has issued 35 reports on the Department of Homeland Security, with a number of them about

border security and featuring analyses of existing border fencing, proposed barrier projects or "tactical infrastructure."

The most recent report, from July 2018, is called CBP Is Evaluating Designs and Locations for Border Barriers but Is Proceeding Without Key Information. CBP is Customs and Border Protection.

"While CBP and DHS did have a strategy and a methodology for identifying and prioritizing locations for border barriers, they did not include an assessment or analysis of costs," said Rebecca Gambler, director of Homeland Security and Justice Issues, who has worked at the GAO for the past 15 years.

The office has not only helped to identify key costs like ongoing annual wall maintenance to taxpayers, but also makes recommendations to government agencies, such as what information the border protection agency needs to proceed with construction. GAO's recommendations are not binding.

"We made a recommendation to CBP that they assess and analyze costs in part of their strategy" to locate and prioritize border barriers, Gambler said. "DHS really wasn't considering cost appropriately. Costs can vary considerably because of terrain or topography of the land."

Lack of performance measures

The GAO's border security reports show that since 2017, auditors have repeatedly recommended that the Border Patrol "develop metrics to assess the contributions of pedestrian and vehicle fencing to border security along the Southwest border using the data Border Patrol already collects and apply this information, as appropriate, when making investment and resource allocation decisions."

"CBP doesn't have measures to be able to assess what taxpayers are getting out of their investment in barriers and fencing on the southwest border," Gambler said.

At present, the border protection agency does not compare estimated illegal entries before and after a barrier is constructed. Neither has it looked at the extent to which fencing is diverting illegal entrants from one area to other areas, and the agency has not analyzed apprehension rates, Gambler said.

"We do believe that CBP and DHS's implementations of our recommendations are important because it would not only help them justify and be able to speak to the existing investments, but also help them as they justify their future investments," Gambler said.

"There are identified benefits from having fencing and barriers in place, like improving agent safety and helping to reduce incursions across the border," Gambler said. "But we have also found CBP does not have metrics in place to assessing how fencing contributes to overall border security on the Southwest border."

The Border Patrol has agreed to the GAO's recommendation to create metrics but it has been left "open." In October, the agency said it would not be able to deliver the metrics as planned for this month, and instead would provide them in September.

Missing maintenance costs

Based on its audits, the congressional watchdog has found that maintaining existing border infrastructure -- walls and fences -- presents a key challenge confronted by the agencies charged with border security. CBP considers a breach an "urgent tactical infrastructure repair." Gambler said her auditors have reported on the costs to CBP of breaches in border barriers and their repair.

Each hole in the barrier costs the U.S. taxpayer. For pedestrian fencing, between 2010 and 2015, CBP recorded a total of 9,287 breaches with repair costs averaging \$784 each. In 2009, the agency estimated that it would spend \$1 billion to repair existing barriers over the next two decades. There is no estimate about how much new sections of border wall would cost to maintain.

The GAO only investigates government agencies at Congress' request. Gambler said that the GAO has not received any requests to investigate border infrastructure or barriers since release of the July report, although she did say GAO is conducting ongoing work on DHS's border security measures.

A report is likely later this year.