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Infrastructure: Expatriate funds build roads

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Editor's note: The Deseret Morning News continues a three-part series today on immigration, legal and illegal. The series explores immigration's impact on the lives of people in both the United States and Mexico, as well as the resulting interdependence of the two nation's economies.

SANTA ROSA, Zacatecas, Mexico — Fausto Goyita Avila proudly stands where the dusty dirt road leading to this town merges with fresh pavement extending to the highway.

He says the project is a prime example of how vital expatriates remain to the economy of this rural region of Zacatecas.

In the Sain Alto municipality where he is president — the equivalent of a county mayor — nearly 19 percent of households receive remittances, or payments from people who have left, according to a Zacatecas development plan.

But that isn't the only way those who have left are chipping in. Avila is an advocate of Mexico's Tres por Uno (Three for One) program, which combines donations from Mexicans living in the United States with Mexican government funding for infrastructure projects such as roads.

"The vision is that people will have a better life," he says in Spanish. "People want a nicer place to live."

The road project here in Santa Rosa was sparked by Salvador Lazalde, a native of the town who now calls Utah home. Lazalde says that when he first had the idea to raise funds to pave the five kilometers of road, at roughly \$125,000 each, it wasn't easy.

"People look around, and they say, 'No way,'" he says. "So I say, 'Let's do it one (kilometer) at a time. If I can get \$100 per person, I need to find 50, 100, 200 people.'"

Showing a list of names of Santa Rosa natives from across the West of the United States who have donated, Lazalde says he's so far been able to finish two kilometers. This year, he's raising funds for the third kilometer.

"The first kilometer was a dream," he says. "Now, no way, it's not a dream any more."

Such projects represent a collaboration between people in Mexico and those living in the United States who still have strong ties to their homeland.

The way the Tres por Uno program works is simple: Each dollar raised by a club in the United States is matched by \$1 each from the municipal, state and federal governments, says Alfredo Gutierrez, coordinator of Institutes of Mexicans Abroad for the Salt Lake Mexican Consulate.

Lazalde heads one of at least six clubs in Utah organized to participate in the program. A Pueblo club wants to revamp a downtown, and a Guanajuato club has applied to build a hospital.

Across the United States, there are some 250 clubs, some of which have formed 80 federations, or umbrella groups, that contribute to Tres por Uno in Zacatecas alone, says Fernando Robledo Martinez, director general of the Instituto Estatal de Migracion in Zacatecas.

In the state of Zacatecas, in some cases the program has become four for one, with an additional dollar coming from private companies.

Miguel Moctezuma Longoria, professor of development studies at Universidad Autonoma de Zacatecas, says that through remittances and cultural ties, immigrants are vital to their hometown communities.

"Immigrants have a presence from a distance," he says in Spanish through an interpreter. "They are part of the original community's destiny and origin."

Tres por Uno was created more than a decade ago by immigrants from Zacatecas, who had been sending money back to their communities for infrastructure projects long before the government got on board, he says.

Gutierrez says the program is becoming more accessible. The Mexican consulate in Salt Lake is advertising the program and helping clubs to organize, and the Utah clubs are forming a federation.

Tres por Uno isn't the only such program. Another program encourages immigrants to invest in businesses that produce jobs in their hometowns in Mexico. Such programs are about building communities and cooperating across borders, Gutierrez says.

"The community decides the project," he says of Tres por Uno. "They can choose the building company, they can choose who benefits, they have their own community manager in Mexico."

However, such projects need approval from the municipality's president, and that's not always easy to come by.

"Sometimes, when a community wants to rebuild a church or soccer field, the government asks, 'Why not bring fresh water to the school?'" he says.

Lazalde says he's lucky that Avila is a proponent of Tres por Uno. However, Avila's term has expired. Lazalde is hopeful that the new president, Jose Angel Zamora, will be as supportive.

Even with his strong ties to Mexico, Lazalde in Utah has also become deeply involved in his new hometown of Murray, as a naturalized U.S. citizen. He has a wife and three daughters, and through his Proyecto Paisano, he seeks to help bridge cultural divides and to help those in need navigate the system.

He says his community involvement was sparked years ago, when he immigrated at age 16 in order to help his ailing mother pay for medical treatment.

"She needed a lot of surgeries," he says. "My dad sold everything he had. My dad said, 'If I have to be on the street, I will do it, but my mother will be OK.'"

Lazalde's brother who was already living in the United States, sponsored him to immigrate. He arrived with his father and found a restaurant job that paid \$1.95 per hour.

"I worked for three years, two shifts," he says. "I paid for everything."

Lazalde's father has since passed away, but his mother is well and living here. He also still has relatives in Mexico.

"My vacations, I spend over there," he says. "My kids need to understand where I came from."

For Lazalde, building the road in Mexico is about safety in a town where during the rainy season, a normally dusty road turns to a muddy mess. "It's really bad," he says. "The river is very dangerous."

Before Tres por Uno, there was a one-for-one program, then a two-for-one, he says. Lazalde took advantage of those programs to raise funds to renovate the church and to build a sturdy bridge.

On the outskirts of Santa Rosa, the old road is still visible. It cut through the river bed. Washouts were common, cutting Santa Rosa off from the highway.

As the sun sets in rural Zacatecas, Avila points out projects that have become reality since he took office. A library, a gas station.

But his wife, Monica Esavula, says there's one more thing she needs to show us. She opens the doors of the Sain Alto ambulance, which is empty, except for a stretcher. She points to the empty space where medical supplies should be.

"They're expensive," she says. "Tell them we need this."

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