What Type Of “Wall” Can Be Built with Trump’s Border Security Budget?

MAY 2017

President Trump promised Americans a “big, beautiful wall” along the southern border. However, his FY 2018 budget request would provide funding for nothing more than a slightly larger-than-normal cattle fence – assuming that all 705 miles of existing fencing remain in place. A cattle fence might serve as an effective barrier if the Border Patrol was only concerned about keeping livestock from wandering into the United States. Unfortunately, a barbed-wire fence will not keep out illegal aliens, gang members, drug smugglers and human traffickers.

To make matters worse, Congress almost never adopts the President’s full funding request. Once Congress slashes the administration’s original budget demand, the President will be lucky he is left with enough to put up a picket fence. Bottom line: President Trump’s FY 2018 budget request reneges on his campaign promise to build an effective barrier on the southern border.
It also means that FY 2019 will be the soonest that a real border wall could be fully funded. Each day without an effective border barrier means an increased threat to the American public. Mexican police are increasingly unable to suppress drug cartel violence on their side of the Border. And volatile economic and political situations throughout Central and South American mean that the U.S. is, at any time, only hours away from the type of border surge that could overwhelm an already over-burdened U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency. Despite recent decreases in the number of illegal aliens being apprehended at the southern border, a physical border barrier remains essential.

**What Could Taxpayers Expect for $1.6 Billion?**

FAIR did some digging around to find out exactly what kind of barrier you can build for the money the President requested. We’re no experts in the “art of the deal,” but there is no way President Trump could build a “big beautiful” border wall with $1.6 billion. Even a medium-sized, ugly, cattle fence would cost more than that.

We assumed the following:

1. Total budget request for new construction on repairs on wall: $1.6 billion
2. U.S./Mexico border length: 1,989 miles
3. Total miles of existing fence on southern border: Approximately 705 miles.
4. A fence is cheaper than a wall.
5. A new fence could integrate existing fencing in order to save money.
6. A minimally effective barrier would consist of:
• 25-foot wooden utility poles spaced roughly 12 feet apart (they’re big, tough, and relatively difficult to cut down).
• 12 vertical strands of barbed wire beginning roughly 12 inches above ground and set roughly 12 inches apart;
• Roughly half the length of the utility poles would need to be set under ground (in order to prevent them being dug up or knocked over).
• One strand of barbed wire would run along the top of the utility poles to discourage attempts to climb over the fence.

**Real World Costs**

Using average costs for barbed wire, utility poles, and construction expenses, here’s our calculation of what a bargain-basement border fence would cost:

**MATERIALS**

- **Barbed wire**
  - 12 strands @ $0.05/ft.³
  - $0.05 x 5280ft = $264/mi
  - $264 x 1989 = $525,096/strand
  - **Total cost for wire: 12 strands x $525,096 = $6,301,152**

- **25-foot utility polls**
  - One poll every 12 feet = 440 posts/mile
  - 440 posts x 1989 miles = 875,160 posts
  - Average cost/post = $176⁴
  - **Total cost for poles: $176 x 875,160 = $154,028,160**

- **Miscellaneous**
  - Staples, Clips, stretching equipment etc.: $200/mile⁵
  - **Total cost for Miscellaneous: $200 x 1989 = $397,800**

**LABOR**

- **Installing Wire**
  - 180 man hours per mile x 1989 total miles = 358,020 hours
  - **Total labor cost for wire: $15/hour labor x 358,020 hours = $5,370,300⁶**

- **Installing Posts**
  - Special equipment needed, plus man hours
  - Most utility company quotes come out to between $1,000-$3,000/pole⁷
  - Split difference at $2,000 x 440 = $880,000/mile
  - **Total cost to install posts: 1989 x $880,000/mile = $1,750,320,000**

**TOTAL**
• Total material costs: $160,727,112
• Total labor costs: $1,755,690,300
• **Total project cost: $1,916,417,412**

The estimated cost for what essentially amounts to a tall cattle fence still comes out **over $300 million more** than what the president requested for a border barrier in the FY2018 budget.

**Conclusion**

During his election campaign, Donald Trump promised to build a “big, beautiful wall” along our southern border.

So how come he only asked Congress for $1.6 billion to do it? While that may sound like a lot of money, it’s barely a drop in the bucket when you want to build a wall that’s 40 feet high and 1,000-2,500 miles long. HomeAdvisor.com estimates that it costs American homeowners about $2,134 - $6,849 just to install a small brick, stone, or cement block wall around their average-sized yard. Walls aren’t cheap, as homeowners know. So it’s understandable that building a much larger wall along the entire length of the U.S.-Mexico border would cost far more than the $1.6 billion requested.

The type of cattle fence you *can* build for that money wouldn’t provide the type of resilient, hardened barrier required to limit the ability of drug cartels, human traffickers, terrorists and other national security threats to access the United States from Mexico and the rest of Central and South America. Instead, it would provide only *serviceable* protection against pedestrian illegal aliens and *minimal* protection against vehicle borne border jumpers. It *would not* provide effective protection against anyone with a ladder, a sturdy set of wire cutters (which can be purchased for less than $10 at a hardware store), or a heavy truck.

What the United States needs is exactly what Donald Trump promised – a big, effective barrier that is resistant to determined aliens and traffickers (human/drug/weapons) on foot or in vehicles. This type of barrier could be built either as the type of multi-layer security fencing mandated under the secure fence act, or as the type of highly-effective and proven wall constructed by Israel to defend itself from terrorists. Either option is workable. Any choice must be backed up with technology and an appropriate number of Customs and Border Protection agents.

The type of wall that is required to do the job correctly will be expensive. According to FAIR’s estimates, an appropriate physical barrier will cost $15-$25 billion. Whatever the cost, it will be money well spent compared to what illegal aliens are already costing taxpayers annually.

The promise to build a “big beautiful wall” was a cornerstone of the immigration plan that propelled Donald Trump to the presidency. If he expects to retain the support of the American public, then President Trump should heed American’s calls to “build that wall” – and do the job right.
3 Agri Supply, https://goo.gl/fd6OBc
4 American Timber and Steel, https://goo.gl/fBwXg2
5 Iowa State University, Ag Decision Maker, https://goo.gl/mlKjGL
6 ibid
7 Based on rough analysis of installation quotes from both private and public electric companies.
8 "How Much Does it Cost to Install A Brick, Stone, or Block Wall?" HomeAdvisor.com
http://www.homeadvisor.com/cost/walls-and-ceilings/install-a-brick-stone-or-block-wall