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One Mexican province, Bulloch County and us

What does a southern Mexican province have to do with southeast Georgia?

On a recent monthlong working visit to Veracruz province in southern Mexico, I was struck by the similarities and amazed at all the people who had spent time in Georgia — often southeast Georgia in particular.

With 7 million people and 212 counties, Veracruz's geography is stunning and competes with the province's amazing history going back thousands of years to the Olmec culture and beyond. However, it also has a great port city of Veracruz City with an academic city, Xalapa, about one hour inland.

Xalapa is much bigger than Statesboro and is also the province's capital, but the port/inland city rela-

tionships are similar. Even the history of the two states, Georgia and Veracruz, are similar, with many of the Civil War generals who passed through Georgia first passing through Veracruz in the 1840s Mexican-American War.

While living there, I shopped at Walmart, Sam's Club and Costco, which had not put the mom and pop businesses that surrounded them out of business. On the contrary, everywhere one turns in Xalapa, mom and pop small businesses are selling an amazing array of goods, many of which directly compete with big discounters.

Mexico is also a country of murals — including a mural of the 1914 U.S. invasion of Veracruz City on the wall at the economics department at the University of Veracruz-Xalapa (uv.mx/fac.economia).

SCAD students would love the economics department — mural after mural show-

ing history and personages.

But the economy of Veracruz cannot support the jobs that are needed, so many Veracruzanos come to southeast Georgia. Here, the two states touch again as the remittances sent back from states such as Georgia are the second largest source of Veracruz province's gross domestic product.

Only the oil lying off the coast and controlled by the federal government has a higher share in the province's GDP. So the tiendas and Western Union offices I see in Bulloch County are directly linked to Veracruz.

Many in the province would prefer to stay and work near home, but the jobs are not there, so they come north. As this is the era of "stimulus" packages, one has to wonder if instead of building a wall on the U.S. southern border, what would happen if we gave the money to Veracruz province as a stimulus package?

Many Mexican families

would be reunited and immigration would be much less.

Thanks to recent research (see references with this column), I learned more about these hardy Veracruzanos who complete amazing journeys to the U.S. in search of higher wages. Just crossing the border costs \$4,000 or more. Once in the U.S., they often pay in to Social Security while having no intention of ever taking money out of the system. Undocumented workers contribute some \$7 billion and even \$1.5 billion to Medicare as well.

They will often avoid using doctors and hospitals out of fear of being discovered. With 20 percent of the population of Mexico living on \$1,000 a year or less, a job in the U.S. below our poverty line paying \$10,000 is quite attractive.

Many items such as durables and cars are surprisingly cheaper in the U.S., leading to shopping

expeditions to places such as south Texas. Language has adapted to the point there is a Spanish verb meaning "to go shopping in south Texas."

I wish these facts and the money they reveal were included in the discussion of immigration in the U.S. Many of my Mexican friends wonder about that, too.

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Porter, Eduardo. 2005. "Illegal Immigrants Are Bolstering Social Security with Billions." New York Times, April 5.

Reliable immigration information sources:

Brookings Institute: brookings.edu/migrationinformation.org
Pew Hispanic Research Center: pewhispanic.org/
The Urban Institute: urban.org/immigrants/index.cfm
U.S. Census Bureau: census.gov
Department of Homeland Security: dhs.gov



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