

Exhibit showcases images of Mexico border walls, fences

By Andrew Welsh-Huggins | AP

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NEWARK, Ohio — The U.S. border wall with Mexico is frequently in the news, but few people have a chance to visit it up close, or to see details of the various sections.

Kenneth Madsen, an Ohio State University geography professor and border wall expert, hopes his new photo exhibit will help bring the border closer to people at a time of heated discussion about the role of the wall, and of barriers in society overall.

“Up Close with U.S.-Mexico Border Barriers” opens Wednesday at the LeFevre Art Gallery on the Ohio State campus in Newark, 40 miles (64 kilometers) east of Columbus. The free exhibit of 33 poster-sized pictures features border wall photos and maps.

One of the exhibit’s goals is creating awareness about the wall, which can include low-grade sections in rural areas meant to stop vehicles and much stronger barriers in cities meant to stop people, Madsen said.

“People don’t generally have a chance to see something up close, at that level of detail, to know what’s going on out there,” he said.

President Donald Trump has held out the possibility of a government shutdown before the November elections over his effort to build a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border, even as Republican congressional leaders publicly urged him away from that path and predicted it wouldn’t occur. “Build the wall!” was a frequent rallying cry during Trump’s 2016 campaign.

Madsen has studied the border wall since his graduate school days 20 years ago. His photo exhibit consists of pictures taken with his iPhone mostly in 2017, when he was on sabbatical.

In one image, children play at a Mexican playground beside a barrier in Tijuana near the Pacific Ocean while a U.S. border agent watches from his SUV on the American side just a couple of hundred feet away.

In another, stadium lights atop tall poles oversee a pedestrian barrier stretching for miles along a section of the wall between Douglas, Arizona, and Agua Prieta in the Mexican state of Sonora.

In a third, a post-on-rail type wall snakes through a Colorado River flood plain between Arizona and Baja California in Mexico, a design meant to minimize soil disturbance in fragile landscapes, as well as to

prevent it being washed away in a flood.

U.S. communities tend to grow away from the border wall, while Mexican communities tend to hug them up close, Madsen said. That helps account for large murals or brightly painted panels along several sections on the Mexican side.

Madsen is also an expert on waivers along the wall, whereby the government can exempt fence construction from a variety of federal requirements, including archaeological and environmental surveys.

Madsen plans to attend an international conference on border walls next week in Montreal.

Another border expert attending that conference says it's important to share the experience of the border with people through such exhibits because so many stereotypes about the wall are wrong.

“The social construction of the border is negative and it's perpetuated by people that have never even seen it, been here, touched it, felt it, crossed it,” said Irasema Coronado, a political science professor at the University of Texas-El Paso and a past president of the Association for Borderland Studies.

Madsen's exhibit isn't overtly political, and provides useful information for people on both sides of the border debate. But he notes the irony that wall building has increased with the rise of globalization.

Though the free-flow of capital means more freedom for more people, “there also are these border walls and fences to restrict movement of people of lesser economic means with fewer opportunities available, who are maybe stuck in bad situations,” he said.

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