



## *Executive Summary*

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program on:

# Solving Our Border Crossing Problem In an Era of Terrorism

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# POLICY ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE OPERATION OF THE LAND PORTS AT THE SAN DIEGO/TIJUANA BORDER

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The sanguinary terrorist attacks on the United States have aggravated the historic problem of long wait times at the southwest border with Mexico because enhanced security measures have meant thorough inspections of every individual and vehicle that crosses into the United States. The ensuing steep climb in border crossing times has caused significant damage to the already weakened border economy, as the flow of workers, shoppers and tourists between Tijuana and San Diego is deterred. If law enforcement measures are allowed to continue slowing down the flow of law-abiding individuals and trade across the border, they will constrain much of the growth prospects of this cross-border economy.

As a public policy organization committed to the development of the San Diego/Baja California region since 1991, San Diego Dialogue knows that the first priority of both federal border agencies and local communities is greater security. However, we are convinced that better law-enforcement and the facilitation of legal traffic across the border can be simultaneously accomplished. This requires a comprehensive partnership between the federal agencies responsible for port of entry operations and the regional community – one that takes into account the following lessons about the cross-border phenomenon learnt in the past decade:

**1. It is possible to identify very low-risk crossers into the U.S. at the San Diego/Tijuana border.** In *Who Crosses the Border*, San Diego Dialogue estimated that in 1992, 312,000 frequent border crossers were responsible for 96% of all crossings; the vast majority of these were low-risk, long-term residents of the border region and enjoyed certified employment. Close to 40% of them were American citizens. If frequent crossers can be identified and pre-inspected, the number of thorough inspections required to take place at the ports of entry themselves can be dramatically reduced, thus permitting law-enforcement efforts to focus on high-risk travelers.

**2. The border-crossing phenomenon is key to the well-being of the region and to its future development.** On the basis of 1992 *Who Crosses the Border* figures, it has been projected that Tijuana area residents currently spend close to 5 billion dollars a year in San Diego; half of this amount would represent taxable sales that provide \$200 million in government revenue. Nearly half of businesses in South County rely on Baja California customers for over 30% of their sales. Over 40,000 workers from Tijuana play an important role in satisfying San Diego's demand for labor, especially in the service sector. Visitors to Tijuana spend at least \$2.6 billion a year in shopping, leisure and recreational activities. Because of the economic importance of border-crossings, a modest reduction in border wait times has been shown to increase sales in San Diego by as much as 5%. By contrast, the increased border waits after September 11 have affected almost three quarter of businesses in South County, some of them with drops in sales greater than 60%.

**3. The SENTRI (dedicated commuter lane) Program has shown that good, solid information on who is showing up at the border provides a better basis for law enforcement than trying to inspect thoroughly every vehicle and person when they appear at the ports of entry. It is also a boon to commerce and tourism.** SENTRI identifies travelers who pose little risk to border security, verifies their low risk status through extensive record checks, and screens approved participants and their vehicles, each and every time they enter the United States. The successful deployment of the SENTRI Program has confirmed to

border authorities and community alike that dedicated commuter lanes are an excellent way of reconciling law enforcement and facilitation objectives.

4. **Even an effective and far-reaching program such as SENTRI cannot by itself solve the complex issue of port of entry operation.** Without a comprehensive, on-going partnership between the region and the inspection agencies SENTRI was not implemented properly, curtailing its full potential, and wait times grew again to be intolerable, with no adequate plan in place to improve the situation. The Ports of Entry Advisory Council has ceased to operate, in effect eliminating the only effective forum for relating regional development and cross-border metropolitan integration goals and projects to POE planning and operations. The region no longer participates in establishing shared goals for port of entry operations, nor is it being included in the monitoring of goals already established. In the absence of this partnership, there is no incentive to engage in timely research and planning or to monitor shared goals. As a result, the agencies do not receive useful feedback from the community and are not accountable to it.

#### **Opportunities for strengthening a partnership between the inspection agencies and the community**

- ***Expand on SENTRI and incorporate pedestrian frequent crossers to the Program.*** The SENTRI Program has been tried and shown effective and is probably the best and most effective investment the government can make for improving security at the border. Nonetheless, it is currently being implemented at a much slower rate than would be desirable for it to have a real impact on law-enforcement and facilitation. Wait times of up to six months to register for the Program and a cost of \$129 a year are a deterrent for potential users, although the goal should be to get all low-risk frequent crossers into SENTRI or a similar secure, automated system for pedestrian crossers.
- ***Reestablish the Ports of Entry Advisory Council.*** This forum could meet quarterly to discuss topics such as emergency actions for alleviating the current congestion at the border, information campaigns by government agencies and community organizations, cooperation with Mexican authorities, options for improving port of entry infrastructure and operation, and possible establishment of new ports of entry.
- ***Develop a coordinated research agenda for the inspection agencies and the community.*** Comprehensive, periodic and up-to-date information on the border-crossing phenomenon is essential in order to make correct policy decisions, evaluate ongoing programs, and form opinion among law-makers and the public in general. The current paucity and inconsistency of data affects everything from daily port management to infrastructure planning. Research should also serve to keep abreast of developments in technology and planning that could be useful for improving port of entry operations, as well as to analyze other border experiences.
- ***Institute a public education and outreach program.*** A publication and outreach strategy should be established to inform elected officials, the media, and key public agencies and private sector associations about the efforts to improve port of entry operations, and to garner support for these initiatives. The border community can and should play a key role in implementing such a strategy.
- ***Build support for a Border Partnership in Washington and Mexico City.*** The present crisis is an opportunity for a community-agency partnership to show Washington that it can contribute to the war against terrorism while at the same time attacking the

border wait problem that has long hampered the development of the San Diego/Tijuana region. This strategy is consonant with the strengthening of our relationship with Mexico and should elicit its cooperation, since it is also in the interest of our southern neighbor that legal crossings of individuals and merchandise into the United States be expedited while security is preserved.

The binational border region of San Diego/Tijuana is unique in all of North America for the size of its population, its social and economic integration and its development potential. It has been a national leader in establishing a rapid commuter lane system that responds to both security and facilitation interests. Now it should also serve as an example of how a committed partnership between border agencies and the binational community could benefit both national security and regional prosperity.



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