

## San Diego-Tijuana: Reinventing a Border Crossing

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Contributing Voice

Published February 11, 2005

How do you design a border crossing for the 21st century? And then set it down in the middle of the most urbanized international boundary region on the planet? That is a question facing the cabinet-level General Services Administration (GSA), the agency tasked with the "San Ysidro Port of Entry Expansion and Reconfiguration Project."

This \$125 million mega-construction project is programmed for completion in 2011. A visionary and daring design could dramatically transform the experience of moving between Tijuana and San Diego-- the most heavily crossed border zone in the world. But, the jury is out on whether or not GSA, a federal bureaucracy based in Washington, D.C., is up to the task.

If ever a conduit between two thriving cities needed a complete facelift, the San Ysidro-Tijuana border gate is it. The existing crossing is one of the most alienating and poorly designed spaces in the region, a cross between a prison and a military encampment. Everything about it -the hard edged, concrete bunker structures, the chain link fences, the strange, dark tunnels-- screams out the too obvious theme of "security," while compromising the border's other main function: the circulation of people, vehicles, goods, services, capital, and technology within a bi-national living space.

This crossing is an ugly reminder of international boundaries in the nineteenth century-- a world of invading armies and heavily militarized land borders.

That era was thought to be long gone on the Mexico-U.S. frontier. In the year 2000, the dawn of a new millennium on this border was celebrated as a time of U.S.-Mexico economic boom. The buzz words were "global market" and the acronym of hope was NAFTA. Free trade. Investors were being lined up to build cross-border airports, rail systems, highways, shopping malls, office complexes.

This frontier growth frenzy came crashing to earth as quickly as the giant twin skyscrapers crumbled to ashes at ground zero. The global cross-border metropolis project was put on hold on September 11, 2001. It has been slow to be revived.

Meanwhile, the architecture of modern border crossings remains trapped in an outmoded, protectionist form. Example: in a series of public meetings held last year to

discuss the future of the new San Ysidro border project, officials from GSA told audiences that "this is, after all, a law enforcement facility."

But is it, or should it be? Why should law enforcement take the lead in designing a border station that is the conduit of a thriving trans-frontier social and economic community? In an age of globalization-- of cross-border trade, bi-national art festivals, and international tourism, yielding billions of dollars for San Diego-Tijuana- - why should a border crossing be defined so overwhelmingly by security concerns?

Consider the case of airports. Security is central to airport operation, no doubt. Yet, airports have become public places with very human design qualities. They can be visually appealing to the user--the newest ones are constructed of glass, filled with sculpture, art, bookstores, cafes, and restaurants. They look and feel like places people enjoy being in. Why should a border crossing--another form of public infrastructure, be any different?

Nearly 100,000 people and over 40,000 vehicles cross this border every day for business, school, shopping or work. It is one of the preeminent public transit zones in southern California. Even the Department of Homeland Security admits that the vast majority of border crossers are neither criminals nor terrorists. If this is so, then why let security be the dominant force?

In Europe, border planning is often referred to as "small foreign policy." The European parliament recognizes that border regions must be organized with local input.

But our border too frequently defers to federal power.

Here is a troubling illustration of this point: the Department of Homeland Security recently created a new "U.S. VISIT" program at the border. "U.S. VISIT" would monitor all incoming foreign visitors, at the stage of ingress and egress through ports of entry.

For San Ysidro, this could mean the addition of a new southbound checkpoint facility for screening cars and pedestrians. Given the thousands of daily southbound border crossers in the region, a screening operation would introduce massive traffic jams into the tiny community of San Ysidro, disrupting business, and generating inconvenience, noise, air pollution and other disamenities.

Much care must be taken to carefully study the environmental impact of the "U.S. VISIT" program. Even greater care should go to the remodeling of SanYsidro Port of

Entry. Border policy may well be "small foreign policy," but urban planning on the border should not be handed over to Washington D.C. bureaucrats.

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