The San Diego Union Sunday, July 8, 1984

The twin cities that must share twin problems

By Lawrence A. Herzog

San Diego and Tijuana. "Twin Cities." Three million urban dwellers, Mexican and American, share the largest border crossing in the world. Two rapidly growing urban partners are fusing together into a sprawling international metropolis, whose domain blankets the political boundary dividing two sovereign nation-states.

This has become a region laced with controversy. Sewage runoff, originating in the city of Tijuana, is the largest source of contamination in San Diego's South Bay area. Undocumented Mexican workers seeking to cross the international boundary are victimized by violent criminals in the canyons and hills just north of the border. Binational problems such as flood control, border traffic management, environmental pollution, health care, land use planning and immigration policy remain on the agendas of both national governments.

The real dilemma facing San Diego and Tijuana is that these cities do not have any formal administrative mechanisms for dealing with the growing set of planning problems confronting them. Interaction between U.S. and Mexican officials tends to occur on a spontaneous and confrontational basis. Dialogue and meetings are cyclical and follow the shifting tide of events, such as flooding or sewage spills, that generates an immediate cause for U.S.-Mexican exchange.

When communication occurs between San Diego and Tijuana officials, the outcome is highly informal. No firm or binding policy decisions normally are made. This usually means that, even when faced with a serious problem that threatens the health and welfare of border residents, as was this past winter's sewage spill crisis, interaction amounts to casual discussion, hand shaking, luncheons and pronouncements to the local media.

This kind of arrangement looms inadequate for the San Diego-Tijuana border zone, truly a region whose future depends heavily upon a better understanding of United States-Mexico relations in this symbiotic container of human activity. Yet it also reflects a paradox that seems to engulf border twin cities. On the one hand, inhabitants of San Diego and Tijuana are inextricably joined together through common family ties, history, economic interests and culture. On the other hand, both cities continue to be separate urban cultures, divided by political differences.

San Diego-Tijuana is a twin city with far-reaching influence. Each city ranks among the 10 largest in its respective nation. The term "border town," once used here as well as in other international border areas, is hardly appropriate now. Yet most of the world's international boundary areas are covered by rather sparsely populated settlements. This resulted from an historic pattern, best illustrated in 18th and 19th century Western Europe, in which border areas served as buffer zones between nation-states where shifting balances of power altered the boundaries between countries.

One other outstanding feature differentiates this twin metropolis from other border settlements around the globe. This is, along with several other large twin cities along the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexican border, the only place in the world where a large-scale urban area from a wealthy industrial nation meets at an international border with an equally large city from a Third World, developing nation.

Differences notwithstanding, these cities are fusing into a single metropolitan area. Seen from the air, this fusion becomes more vivid. Freeways run north and south across the international boundary, allowing a steady flow of Mexican and U.S. autos, carrying workers, shoppers, businessmen, tourists and visitors in either direction. Consumer goods, assembled industrial products, technology, money and ideas flow freely between the two cities. Both sides benefit from the growing network of exchanges.

But San Diego and Tijuana also suffer from their increasingly intimate ties. This is not only a metropolitan area integrated by culture and economics, it is also a single physical environment, an ecosystem in which the forces of nature know no political boundaries. Tijuana's water table flows naturally into San Diego's South Bay area. During the past winter, massive quantities of raw sewage poured through several canyons downhill into the Tia Juana River Valley in San Diego. As the contamination became more severe, pres-

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sure mounted in San Diego for some policy action to resolve the problem. Ultimately, two cities belonging to separate national governments were called upon to resolve a common environmental planning problem generated in an international border settlement.

The overall inability of U.S. and Mexican officials to make policy decisions in the mutual interests of protecting the environment of San Diego-Tijuana must be recognized. If the two cities are ecologically wedded, their decision-makers are geopolitically divorced.

In the recent sewage controversy, an acute absence of joint understanding, no less cooperative decision-making, was evident. Breakages in Tijuana's antiquated sewage lines, combined with uncollected sewage, seeped down the canyons, across the international boundary, and into San Diego. Once Mexico refused an offer from the United States for direct assistance in making repairs to the sewage lines, the dialogue was virtually cut off. Officials in San Diego expressed frustration and hostility toward Mexico, claiming that it did not accept its responsibility in the matter. At the same time, they pleaded with the U.S. federal government to accept financial responsibility for physical facilities that will be needed in the long run to solve the sewage management problem.

Mexican officials, in the meantime, explained that the problem was being attended to in the main offices of the Mexican government responsible for the matter. These offices, now part of the responsibility of the secretary for urban development and ecology (SEDUE), are in Mexico City. From Mexico City, the problem of a broken sewage line allowing spillage into the United States is not as serious as the plight of a city of more than 16 million inhabitants with massive housing shortages, poverty, unemployment, crime, air and water pollution. In short, the political culture of Mexico did not allow for a public policy solution to the Tijuana sewage problem at the rate and style of policy-making that U.S. officials are accustomed to. The resulting tensions, public outcry and frustration of San Diegans might be softened if Mexican political culture were better understood here by citizens and their elected officials, especially in a region that sees itself as culturally tied to Mexico.

The sewage problem, of course, is hardly the first time, nor will it be the last, that San Diego and Tijuana have struggled with environmental or social problems that affect both cities, but must be resolved through separate political systems. In 1980, heavy winter rains caused the Tia Juana River to become a raging torrent. It ultimately released its floodwaters into the river valley on the U.S. side of the border, causing millions of dollars of property damage. No coordinated system of water management allowed for possible controls on the binational effects of this flood, nor for future preventative measures.

More recently, the planning for the second border crossing and other development projects on the Otay Mesa appear to have taken place without enough communication between U.S. and Mexican officials. What is unfolding on this plateau can best be described as two separate land use plans attached to two disparate urban cultures.

In a region that is unquestioningly becoming unified, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that perhaps we must move beyond the era of informal policy-making between the United States and Mexico. Given the tight-knit web of interrelations in the San Diego-Tijuana metropolis, the well-being of several million border region dwellers may depend upon better mutual resolution of such planning issues as environmental pollution, sewage control, traffic management, health care and land use regulation.

Some border observers feel that the only possible form of U.S.-Mexico policy-making can be one of informal dialogue. Yet recent history suggests that such activity cannot solve the problems facing twin cities. These problems are complex and will demand financial, technical and plan-

ing expertise, serious political commitment and, most of all, an administrative vehicle that allows the two nations to engage in tangible discussions that lead to sound policy-making.

In short, what is needed is some kind of formal U.S.-Mexico organization that generates binding decisions at the local level, but is backed up by commitment from national leaders in Mexico City and Washington, D.C. This is not to advocate another burdensome bureaucracy, but rather, to consider the creation of a binational planning agency that will provide the structure and commitment both cities will need to efficiently plan their futures.

A successful binational, border planning model has been developed in Western Europe. It was created by the Council of Europe's Convention on Transfrontier Cooperation, an agreement by the 19-nation European political organization, based in Strasbourg, France, to set up bargaining mechanisms and the means to create legal agreements to foster transfrontier cooperation between towns along the borders of member nations.

International commissions formed through the Council of Europe are dealing with such boundary problems as the pollution of the Rhine River along the Germany-Netherlands-Switzerland-Luxembourg borders; the dephosphation of Lake Geneva on the French-Swiss border; firefighting and rescue service delivery at the Spain-Portugal boundary; and air pollution control along the France-Switzerland-Germany borders.

In the aftermath of the recent sewage spill problem in San Diego County, the absence of a formal structure to bring together U.S. and Mexican officials was obvious. Good will between San Diego leaders and Mexican officials was unable to bring either a rapid or permanent solution to this problem. This region, in which two cities are becoming part of a single international living space, needs a more hard-hitting mechanism in which to administer U.S.-Mexico solutions to border problems such as sewage management, law enforcement, transport planning and the like.

Perhaps it would be useful to consider the model of transfrontier planning in place in Western Europe. While it is true that the United States and Mexico are more dissimilar culturally and economically than are the nations of Western Europe, this should not detract from the essential benefits of the European border planning approach. Why not form a San Diego-Tijuana Regional Planning Authority, or a San Diego-Tijuana Sewage Authority, composed of chosen elected officials from both countries? If such an agency were given jurisdictional powers similar to the International Boundary and Water Commission, it would offer the advantage of providing a structure within which both nations might construct compromises to important planning issues.

By clarifying the rules of the game, such a formal administrative organization may provide the necessary means to begin to bridge the gap between two very different cultures that are being brought together in the complex arena of an international border metropolis.

Herzog is supervisor of field studies and lecturer in urban studies and planning at the University of California, San Diego.