

**Business Delegation Finds Support for Cross-Border Airport Terminal
Construction of Second Border Crossing, Megaport Also Discussed**

By Mike Allen
April 30, 2007

Momentum for a cross-border airport terminal in Otay Mesa may have gained a bit after a recent mission by officials from both sides of the border to Mexico City.

One primary reason behind the mission held April 16 to 19 was to elicit top-level support for key infrastructure border improvements, including the airport terminal and second border crossing at Otay Mesa.

Without support at the federal level from both nations, the projects probably won't happen, said Ruben Barrales, president of the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce.

"It's vital that we get their support on these infrastructure projects," Barrales said. "To be successful, these infrastructure improvements will require acts of two Congresses, both from our federal government and from the Mexican Congress. We're dealing with two of the largest federal governments in the world."

The airport terminal project would connect air travelers on the San Diego side of the border to a terminal at Rodriguez International Airport in Tijuana.

The project has been discussed for years, and finally received support from several high-ranking Mexican officials, which was encouraging, said several people who made the trip.

"I was pleasantly surprised by the fact that there was a new administration (President Felipe Calderon was elected in July) and new players, but they all seemed very well informed about our projects and how supportive they were across the board," said Doug Perkins, who represented the South County Economic Development Council.

In addition to 27 members of the mission from San Diego, the mission also brought 18 officials and business representatives from Tijuana.

The regional delegation met with several members of the Mexican Congress, the under Secretary of Transportation, and a cabinet secretary for the economy. The latter person, Felipe Duarte Olvera, is an advisor to Calderon on matters of economy and competitiveness, Barrales said.

Including officials and business people from Tijuana has been done before and proved instrumental in meeting the right decision-makers.

“In our challenge to get the attention at the federal level from both Mexico City and Washington, we found that when we go to Mexico, when we include leaders from Tijuana as part of the delegation, it increases our effectiveness,” Barrales said.

Luis Cabrera, consul general of Mexico stationed in San Diego and a delegate on the trip, said the main message the group was attempting to convey was the shared vision of both San Diego and Tijuana officials on the planned projects.

“The purpose of the meetings is to show that we’re working together and also planning together for these projects,” Cabrera said.

A feasibility study for a cross-border facility just north of Rodriguez International Airport in Tijuana was authorized by the San Diego Airport Authority last year.

This month, the agency that oversees Lindbergh Field approved a request for proposal for consultants to do the study, estimated to cost \$385,000. The contract is expected to be awarded in June.

A cross-border terminal at Otay Mesa would likely benefit both sides, said Charlene Zettel, a member of the Airport Authority’s executive committee that made the Mexico City trip along with fellow executive Robert Watkins.

“They (the Mexican officials) were very open to the concept,” Zettel said. “They realize their economic future depends on the economic future of the United States. When we have good economic times, their economy goes up as well.”

Yet another key infrastructure project discussed in the high-level meetings was Punto Colonet, a new container shipping port being planned south of Ensenada.

The megaport is reportedly going to rival cargo operations at San Pedro and Long Beach, two of the largest container ports on the West Coast, and could have positive impacts on San Diego.

“They assured us Punto Colonet would be built,” said James Clark, the director general of the Mexico Business Center for the chamber.

The delegation also discussed delays at the border crossing and how they might be reduced.

A second border crossing just east of the existing Otay Mesa border crossing has been proposed in recent years, supported by studies done by the San Diego Association of Governments, the regional planning agency.

Because of the lack of funding at the federal and state levels for these improvements, regional leaders have been discussing the concept of financing a new border crossing through user fees, Clark said.

The concept has already been proved successful nearby with the-soon-to-be-completed Route 125 connector freeway, a toll road built by private interests.

That method might also be used in financing the cross-border terminal as well, Clark said.

Yet another major infrastructure project in the works is a major realignment of the San Ysidro border crossing, the world's busiest border port of entry.

That project's cost was estimated at \$550 million several years ago, and exceeds the entire budget for capital improvements for all U.S. ports of entry, said several sources.

The airport authority appears keen on exploring the cross-border terminal at Otay Mesa following last year's defeat of a measure that would have possibly lead to the construction of a new airport in Miramar, now a Marine Corps aviation training facility.

Zettel said studies done for the airport agency forecast that within 10 years air traffic at Lindbergh Field will exceed its capacity.

It behooves the agency to seek out alternatives and the cross-border terminal is one of these, she said.

"It presents an interesting opportunity for San Diego travelers, another choice," she said. "Our challenge is how to make it convenient for travelers and how to provide them with enough security. There are still some serious hurdles to surmount."