



Border region economic links focus of forum

By Dean Calbreath

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With all the debate about illegal immigrants, post-Sept. 11 security checks and walls along the U.S.-Mexican border, it is easy to forget the economic ties that bind San Diego County and the communities of northern Baja California.

But that was a recurrent theme of a half-day economic seminar that the South County Economic Development Council held yesterday at the San Diego Convention Center.

Although the seminar touched on many topics specifically dealing with South County, such as the status of Gaylord Entertainment's plans to build a hotel, retail and convention complex on the Chula Vista bayfront, much of the talk focused on transborder relations, thanks partly to a strong contingent of Mexican officials.

Hugo Torres, mayor of Rosarito Beach, talked about how construction of condominiums along the waterfront is being driven by baby boomers from the United States who want "the same beachfront and scenery that you can get in La Jolla but at a much lower price."

Torres said condo construction is helping improve city infrastructure. There is a tax of \$500 to \$1,000 on each new condo, which helps pay for sidewalks, municipal lighting and better police services.

Adrian Mejia, secretary for economic development in Tijuana, talked about how the city is building a major cargo station to handle freight coming across the border.

Factories in the city are suffering because of the long waits at the border, which can last one to 1½ hours even under good conditions, Mejia said. He said some trucks have to wait six to eight hours.

The frontier between San Diego and Tijuana is the world's busiest border crossing, with more than 22 million vehicle crossings each year and nearly 52 million foot crossings at San Ysidro and Otay Mesa. Mejia and most of the other elected officials at the meeting – Mexican and American – spoke about the need for another crossing at Otay Mesa.

"Mexican shoppers are waiting two, three or four hours to get to a Macy's special in San Diego," Mejia said.

On the U.S. side, Assemblywoman Mary Salas, D-Chula Vista, touted her push to let Americans go to Tijuana to get their medical training, since U.S. nursing schools are so crowded.

Chula Vista Mayor Cheryl Cox said she is still interested in finding ways the Tijuana airport could help alleviate crowded conditions at Lindbergh Field. That plan has been opposed by some conservative U.S. politicians who worry that it could open the door to more illegal immigration, drug smuggling or terrorist incidents.

But Cox said she does not think the idea of working with the airport is dead, especially if there are proper security and safety procedures in place.

“What an extraordinary transportation boom that would be,” she said.