

South County, Tijuana Leaders Double Stacking at Border Ports

By Mike Allen

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With wait times at San Diego's two main border crossings running more than two hours on busy days, a regional group of organizations is offering a solution federal officials are now testing: double stacking.

The concept is similar to what major retailers such as Target and Wal-Mart use to cut down on customer waiting times at checkout, installing a counter behind an existing counter, or stacking them.

"Double stacking is an immediate remedy to alleviate some of the wait times that we can do right now," said Cindy Gomper-Graves, executive director of the South County Economic Development Council, a business advocacy group for four South Bay cities.

In fact, the concept has been floated before and is currently being studied by U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the agency that operates the nation's ports of entry.

"We've had a double stacked booth at the San Ysidro port of entry for the past six to eight weeks, and we're evaluating it for potential use at the new port of entry," said Vince Bond, CBP spokesman for the San Diego field office. "We're testing the concept, and in the process of gathering data to see if we can improve processing times."

Those times can vary widely, depending on the time of day and day of the week. The weekends in the afternoon hours tend to be the worst, and three-hour wait times to traverse either at San Ysidro or Otay Mesa coming into the United States from Mexico are not that unusual, say regular crossers.

"It's erratic and it can vary from a half hour to more than two-and-a-half hours," said Steve Otto, executive director of the San Ysidro Business Association, which operates a business improvement district. "I crossed as a pedestrian last Sunday (April 29) around noon, and it took me over an hour. It's a function of how many booths are open and how many inspectors are working."

The San Ysidro port of entry, said to be the world's busiest with 24 gates, handles an average of 150,000 people daily, including 35,000 to 45,000 cars; 25,000 to 35,000 pedestrians; and 200 to 300 buses, said Bond.

To help the CBP in studying the possible short-term solution to excessive wait times, Rep. Bob Filner, D-San Diego, has endorsed stacking and has requested an additional \$2 million in the 2008 Homeland Security Appropriations Bill.

In a letter dated April 25 to Rep. David Price, D-N.C., the chairman of the House Subcommittee on Homeland Security, Filner asked that the stacked booths be implemented at both San Ysidro and Otay Mesa with the increased funding.

Calls to Filner's office in Washington, D.C., and Chula Vista were not returned.

Bond was unaware of whether the double stacking plan had been reviewed at any other ports in the country, and referred the question to CBP's main office in Washington.

He said one problem with double stacking became evident when the first car in a lane hadn't been cleared by an inspector, but the car behind it had been. Because there isn't enough space to pass, the car behind the first car simply has to wait, Bond said.

But even with this flaw, border community activists say implementing the double stacking is worth trying.

"If you have more booths, and more inspectors, and the right technology in place, it should speed crossings, and in effect, reduce wait times," Otto said. "As a result, more people coming from the south can get across to their jobs faster and to shop on this side."

A study on the economic cost of excessive border wait times by the San Diego Association of Governments released last year determined the impact to the San Diego/Tijuana region was more than \$4 billion, and cost the region about 43,000 jobs.

Border times escalated nationally following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials took a more aggressive stance to intercept the escalating flow of illegal immigrants and drugs in addition to stopping possible incursions from organized terrorists.

The increase in inspectors and enhanced security has greatly increased the capture of smugglers trafficking in people and drugs, and sometimes both.

For example, for the week concluded April 22, officers at San Ysidro and Otay Mesa ports seized more than a ton of marijuana, 58 pounds of cocaine, 2.6 pounds of heroin, and 2.7 pounds of methamphetamine, according to a CPB statement available on its Web site.

The same report said CBP officers "identified scores of immigration violations, including a Senti-registered participant arrested for allegedly attempting to smuggle a Mexican woman into the United States."

Senti (Secure Electronic Network for Travelers Rapid Inspection) is a federal program for frequent border crossers that uses radio technology to permit pre-screened people to cross more quickly.

Business groups both in San Diego and Tijuana have lobbied federal officials for many years about enhancing and improving conditions and staffing at San Ysidro and Otay Mesa.

Those efforts have recently taken on greater significance as plans to realign and move the San Ysidro crossing, and open a second Otay Mesa crossing, take shape.

Both projects are several years away from construction start dates, but design plans for the San Ysidro project have been budgeted for the 2008 fiscal year.

Earlier this month, several local groups led by the San Ysidro Chamber of Commerce formed a Smart Border Coalition to ensure that whatever new port is built will provide sufficient security for the nation, and also accommodate commerce and the community of San Ysidro.

“An ill-conceived border — a single-service security compound — will be extremely deleterious for the region,” said a position paper released by the coalition April 27.