

Gaining a handle on border gridlock

BY UNION-TRIBUNE EDITORIAL BOARD,
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SIX YEARS AFTER IT WAS INTRODUCED, THE SENTRI CARD FOR TRUSTED TRAVELERS CROSSING THE BORDER AT SAN YSIDRO IS A DISAPPOINTMENT, ESPECIALLY FOR PEDESTRIANS FACING HOURS IN LINE.

At the world's busiest port of entry, where 90,000 people a day cross the border, 25 percent of motorists take advantage of SENTRI cards and expedited handling. Just 2 percent of pedestrians do.

Crossers know the system is not working. So does new border czar Alan Bersin, who just set goals for much higher participation.

Now, thanks to the South County Economic Development Council and the San Ysidro Chamber of Commerce, commuters are getting a chance to tell Bersin and the entire Customs and Border Protection agency what they think. Teams of 10 interviewed border crossers in English and Spanish as they stepped out of the customs building for seven business days in July. Some 1,175 responded to the first of four quarterly surveys.

They answered the who (54 percent Mexican citizens, 34 percent American citizens and 14 percent green card holders) and the why (31 percent to shop, 24 percent to visit family and friends, and 23 percent for business or work). They told what is wrong (they don't know about the program, they are confused on the cost, or they see few benefits).

CEO Cindy Gompper-Graves of the sponsoring economic development council said the pedestrians offered these suggestions:

- Market the program heavily in English and Spanish. Have inspectors give handbills to regular crossers not enrolled.
- Have completely differentiated pedestrian lanes with monitoring to discourage cutting in line.
- Have an electronic sign flashing the real wait times.
- Improve the scheduling of inspectors.

Higher SENTRI participation is important. Zip the good guys through and there is more time to intercept the bad guys. Zip trusted people through and they have more time for what they are crossing for – shop, work or study.

Vibrant border commerce, so vital to this region, desperately depends upon improvements in the flow of people and goods.