

# Poll: Border-crossing pass underused

95 percent of legal crossers at San Ysidro don't have a SENTRI pass

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ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 21, 2010 AT 1:07 P.M., UPDATED AUGUST 23, 2010 AT 12:52 P.M.



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Customs Officer Jonathan Imus checked the documents of a border crosser with a SENTRI crossing card at the San Ysidro Port of Entry Monday.

Six years after a trusted-traveler program was launched to help speed up border crossings for pedestrians, 95 percent of people who regularly walk into San Ysidro from Mexico don't have a SENTRI pass and lack a clear understanding of how the system works, according to a new poll.



PHOTO BY JOHN GIBBINS

While crossers on the right line up at the San Ysidro crossing Monday, the line for SENTRI card holders is empty. The San Ysidro Pedestrian Port of Entry Crossing survey was conducted last month by the South County Economic Development Council, with help from the San Ysidro Chamber of Commerce. It found that of those who don't have a SENTRI

frequent-commuter pass, 22 percent said they didn't believe it would save them time or was worth the cost. Twenty percent said they didn't know how to obtain one and 15 percent said they had never considered getting a SENTRI card.

In addition, 14 percent said they thought they were ineligible. The rest of the respondents gave other reasons, including fears of having their legal status revoked.

"To wait over an hour, the elderly, children, in the hot sun on a muggy day is not acceptable," said Cindy Gompper-Graves, CEO of the development council. "We have to find a way to make this work without compromising security and commerce for either the United States or Mexico."

Gompper-Graves is organizing the survey results and recommended solutions in hopes of presenting a report this week to U.S. Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Alan Bersin, who recently committed the agency to boosting the overall amount of SENTRI cardholders to 75 percent.

The agency said about 25 percent of vehicles going through the San Ysidro crossing have enrolled in the SENTRI program, while only 2 percent of pedestrians have.

Customs and Border Patrol cooperated with the survey's coordinators, said Jackie Dizdul, spokeswoman for the agency.

"We will continue to work with our local partners and with our international partners to increase SENTRI enrollment," she said. "We look forward to using this survey and other feedback from the community as a starting point."

SENTRI — Secure Electronic Network for Traveler's Rapid Inspection — allows low-risk, preapproved travelers to be processed quickly when entering the United States. It's used at land ports of entry in California, Arizona and Texas.

The program began in 1998 for drivers. In 2004, customs officials expanded it to include pedestrian crossers. Since two years ago, SENTRI participants have been allowed to use the same pass for designated vehicle and pedestrian lanes.

Leaders at the San Ysidro Chamber of Commerce said many in the community knew anecdotally about why people lacked SENTRI passes and are now pleased to have some statistics to back it up.

The group recently asked customs officials to let it take over marketing of the SENTRI program, said its executive director, Jason Wells.

"(Customs and Border Protection) should do the inspections but work with the community to do the marketing and assistance with the application process," Wells said. "It can be done at a fraction of what it would cost CBP to do it exclusively."

Tony Cruz, project manager for the survey, called the results a “snapshot in time.”

Teams of up to 10 people each were stationed at the customs building in San Ysidro, with permission from customs officials, from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. for seven consecutive working days in July. Cruz said respondents were surprisingly open when answering questions about crossing times.

About 57 percent of respondents said they crossed at least a couple of times a week, and as many as 24 percent said they cross daily. More than one-third of the participants said they enter San Diego County to shop, 24 percent said they visit family and friends, and 23 percent said they go to work or conduct some kind of business on this side of the border. Others said they cross to go to school (8 percent), for tourism (6 percent), for a medical reason and for other purposes (5 percent).

Gompper-Graves said the number of people crossing for school was skewed downward because the survey was taken in July. She plans to conduct three more surveys, once for each of the next three quarters, to get a more complete picture.

Cruz also said many of those surveyed thought a SENTRI pass cost \$180 to \$300 per year, when the actual cost is \$122 for a five-year pass.

He said as a SENTRI card-holder himself, he knows the rules. But the survey showed that most respondents were unaware that a pedestrian may pass the long lines of pedestrian crossers in Mexico, and once inside the Customs building on the U.S. side, are directed to yet another shorter SENTRI lane.

“When I cross, I have to deal with people who are upset because they think I’m trying to cut in front of them,” Cruz said. “I walk on the street to avoid them.”

Gompper-Graves said some quick and inexpensive solutions include having Customs agents passing out cards to those they know as frequent crossers, suggesting they sign up for SENTRI and telling them how. They also could have applications at the checkpoints. She said more signage about the program and to direct SENTRI pass holders would also help.

“We think the protocol for SENTRI card users needs to be communicated to the card holders,” Gompper-Graves said. “They need to be told how to get a card and that it’s not as expensive as they might think. They also need to communicate wait times, to effectively show how beneficial holding a card is. If you see that every day, you’ll say I need to get a SENTRI card.”

Cruz and Gompper-Graves are making their first public presentation of the survey results Friday at the San Ysidro Chamber offices.

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