



Border wait blamed for falloff of business

Summit speakers call for better staffing, equipment

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More than a year after the Sept. 11 attacks, San Diego County is still feeling the economic effects of tighter border security.

The average wait to cross the San Ysidro Port of Entry has increased from 34 to 45 minutes in the past year despite fewer people crossing, according to the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Cross-border traffic dominated discussions yesterday at a summit organized by the South County and Tijuana economic development councils. Speakers said better staffing, new technology and infrastructure improvements are urgently needed to make the border crossings more efficient.

The border crossing deserves the same consideration as the city's hosting of the Super Bowl and the generation of tourism, they said.

"Border crossers spend more, and deserve at least this level of attention," said Kenn Morris, director of Crossborder Business Associates, a research firm in Otay Mesa.

Baja California residents spent \$1.5 billion in the United States last year, mainly in the San Diego region, Morris said, citing a study by the Autonomous University of Baja California.

About two-thirds of border crossers coming to San Diego are shoppers, and most of them spend in the South Bay, he said, citing the same study.

Morris said his firm's survey of more than 100 South Bay businesses showed that they estimated Baja California shoppers accounted for one-third of their sales.

Long waits at the border were impeding business, he said. His study showed that waits were generally longer than an hour during the weekend, a finding the INS disputes.

The INS did not dispute the drop in border crossings since Sept. 11, however.

Border crossings plunged immediately after Sept. 11, and though they increased again, they have not fully rebounded.

During the first six months of this year, 23.8 million crossings were recorded at San Ysidro and Otay Mesa, compared with 28.8 million during the same period last year, Morris said, using INS figures. That translates into an average of 480,000 fewer vehicle passengers and 358,000 fewer pedestrian crossings each month, he said.

INS Director Adele Fasano said the largest drop has been in foot traffic, and the federal agency is considering a special lane for frequently crossing pedestrians who undergo background checks. Vehicle traffic has rebounded better partly because the INS operates two special lanes for frequent crossers, she said.

Inspections should speed up without sacrificing security, Fasano said, with the addition of three "laser visa" scanning machines that can detect phony crossing cards easier.

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