

Cross-border dreams adrift, critics contend

New realities diverting attention of Davis, Murphy

By Sandra Dibble

STAFF WRITER

June 30, 2003

Hopes soared when Gov. Gray Davis took office in 1999, vowing to mend California's strained relations with Mexico. On the San Diego-Tijuana border, many dreamed of unprecedented binational collaboration.

But more than four years later, those hopes have given way to more sober assessments.

Terrorism concerns, domestic crises and, critics say, a lack of leadership on the part of Davis and San Diego Mayor Dick Murphy have clipped dreams of building a binational region.

"It's not considered a high priority," said Lucy Killea, a former state senator who has long been active in border affairs. "There's not the concept on our side that this needs to be a continuing effort, that it's something that requires nourishing."

Davis' early efforts – trips to Mexico City, an invitation to Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo to speak in Sacramento in 1999 – were well-received in Mexico. The exchanges ended years of acrimony over Gov. Pete Wilson's support for Proposition 187, a 1994 California ballot initiative to cut off publicly funded state services to illegal immigrants.

Yet many involved in cross-border affairs are disappointed that more has not been accomplished. Government agencies, business groups, educators and state legislators continue to collaborate. But Davis and Murphy, distracted by domestic problems, have largely been absent.

"Leaders set the course, and in this case neither Davis nor Murphy has set the course toward linking our future with Mexico or acknowledging the importance of our border region," said Kenn Morris, executive director of Crossborder Business Associates, a research firm based in Otay Mesa.

"We have this unique proximity, economic and demographic advantage that no other region has, and these two people who have important leadership positions are not creating a vision and promoting that vision. We have an advantage that we're not taking advantage of."

The Democratic governor's defenders say he has been weighted down by enormous challenges: The 2001 energy crisis, California's record budget deficit, and now a Republican-led drive to recall him from office.

"I burn the candle at both ends, and the governor does, too – we do the best that we can," said Mike Flores, Davis' secretary of foreign affairs.

San Diego's Republican mayor, who is running for re-election, has been consumed by his own set of issues:

negotiations over the Padres' ballpark, a new stadium for the Chargers and a budget shortfall. In his state of the city address last January, the mayor listed 10 goals; building relations with Mexico wasn't among them.

Murphy believes the relationship with Mexico is "very important," said Rudy Fernandez, the mayor's aide on Mexican affairs. "But by the same token, he said, 'I've got to take care of business at home.' Unfortunately, there's been a lot of crises that have taken an inordinate amount of time."

Strong ties

Advocates of closer border relations say the Tijuana-San Diego relationship is too crucial to fall so low on the list of the leaders' priorities.

"There's a lot happening beneath the radar," said Rep. Bob Filner, D-San Diego, whose district includes the border. "I go to meetings when I'm home in San Diego, and there's excitement, there's activity, there's vitality about border issues."

The border is crossed by countless connections, from family ties to businesses to health and environmental issues, which persist no matter what the political climate may be.

Mexico is California's largest trading partner, and California has more Mexican-born residents than any other state. The San Diego Dialogue, an organization that promotes cross-border ties, estimates that shoppers from Mexico spend about \$3 billion annually in the San Diego region.

But since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, tightened border security has made routine interactions more burdensome. With border waits so long, San Diego city officials think twice about crossing south for meetings with their Tijuana counterparts.

"If they want to have any kind of meeting where our group goes to Mexico, we have to clear off our whole day," said Yvonne Williams, a deputy director of San Diego's environmental services department.

Since taking office, Davis has missed two of four Border Governors Conferences, annual gatherings where six Mexican and four U.S. border governors and their staffs discuss common concerns. Davis' staff said pressing budget meetings kept him from attending.

"We'd like to see him, to see his leadership," said Ernesto Ruffo Appel, Mexico's Commissioner of the Northern Border. "Everything has functioned . . . but it would be much more comfortable if the governor were present."

Earlier this year, Baja California Gov. Eugenio Elorduy expressed his frustration in *The San Diego Union-Tribune* over difficulties communicating with the Davis administration. The two had pledged cooperation on a variety of issues in December 2001 in Mexico City, and Elorduy complained he hadn't gotten a follow-up.

Within days of the report, Davis met with Elorduy in San Diego. Elorduy says relations are now "good," and that he hopes for more collaboration, particularly on housing and education.

Davis began focusing on Mexico when he courted California's Latino voters during his 1998 campaign. He continued to stress the relationship after his inauguration.

According to Flores, that led to Davis' greatest cross-border accomplishment: mending California's relationship with its southern neighbor.

That relationship is stronger than ever, Flores says. Key Cabinet members such as William Lyons, California's agriculture secretary, and Winston Hickox, secretary of the California Environmental Protection Agency, have built especially close relationships with their Baja California counterparts.

"There was a change in the climate that was very significant," said Carlos Rico, a top official with the Mexican Embassy in Washington, D.C.

Past success

Many advocates of closer cross-border relations point to the strong links former San Diego Mayor Susan Golding built with Tijuana as an example of what can be accomplished.

The relationship was forged during the January 1993 floods that devastated Tijuana. Golding sent about 50 city trucks to help Tijuana dig out, and in the process built a friendship with Mayor Hector Osuna Jaime, now a federal senator representing Baja California.

The two watched baseball together. And after Tijuana's police chief was gunned down in 1994, Osuna's friends at Golden Hall searched for a safe house in San Diego for the mayor's pregnant wife.

"Hector was a class act, and he had great odds working against him," Golding said.

In April 1994, the two mayors set up a Binational Planning and Coordinating Committee, under which department heads from the two cities met once a month and reported to the mayors every three months.

Rather than go through their respective federal governments, the cities communicated directly. They set their emergency communication systems to the same frequency, lobbied for funds for a border sewage treatment plant and consulted on urban development projects.

Golding's administration kept up the relationship with Osuna Jaime's successors, although the personal link weakened toward the end of her term.

Under Murphy, it weakened further.

Murphy has made one official trip to Tijuana, and staff members say the Binational Planning and Coordination Committee hasn't convened in more than two years.

Tijuana's mayor, Jesús González Reyes, who has met Murphy four times in San Diego, is quick to point to areas of cooperation.

San Diego helped Tijuana obtain a U.S. Department of Energy grant to study Tijuana's aquifer and has been working with the state of California to train Tijuana inspectors to detect sources of water pollution. The Environmental Services department sent a team to advise Tijuana on its new landfill. The cities' police departments remain in daily contact.

Still, González hungers for a closer relationship, and the larger benefits it could bring.

"If we don't have a strong relationship between the cities, we lose the opportunity to take up common causes and push issues in Washington, D.C., and Mexico City," the mayor said. "We lose the opportunity to position ourselves in the world as a unique region."

Sandra Dibble: (619) 293-1716; sandra.dibble@uniontrib.com

Copyright 2003 Union-Tribune Publishing Co.