

San Ysidro Crossing on Road to Expansion

Construction Phase of U.S.-Mexico Border Crossing Project Slated for 2007

By JULIE POUCHER HARBIN

The \$125 million-plus expansion and reconfiguration of the San Ysidro Border Station, the world's busiest land port of entry, could go one of four ways — to be decided in the next 18 months.

Already, the area's business community, whose shops, restaurants, and services depend on a healthy flow of cross-border traffic between the United States and Mexico, wants assurances that the ultimate design, which has four different options on the drawing board, will benefit them.

"The border is our biggest resource and it's also our nemesis," said Israel Adato, president of the San Ysidro Chamber of Commerce. "San Ysidro cannot be separated from the border as far as planning issues and everything is concerned."

Rep. Bob Filner, D-Chula Vista, said he fears the expansion, with a possible re-configuration of Interstate 5 and adjacent roadways, could split up his community geographically.

"If you put a major freeway through a community ... you are breaking up a community. The I-5 went in and did it, the I-805 went in and did it. (My constituents) are afraid that the new I-5 will do it," Filner said. "Businesses are disrupted, the community can't get to each other by walking."

Key contractors have been selected and official community outreach meetings by the U.S. General Services Administration running the project are slated to commence soon.

While construction is still more than three years away, few are looking forward to the kind of bottlenecks a large-scale construction project could create.

The San Ysidro Border Station is between San Ysidro, a community of San Diego, and Tijuana. According to the General Services Administration, the project will increase operational efficiency, security, and safety.

The agency is responding to projections that the population on both sides of the border will increase dramatically in the next 10 years leading to more traffic.

"We're trying to react to those numbers," Border Station Specialist Ramon Riesgo said, while admitting that the new facility is not being built "ahead of its time."

There's already a 45-minute to an hour wait for southbound traffic into Mexico between 3 and 7 p.m., he said.

An average of 141,000 people crossed northbound daily through the San Ysidro port of entry during the last six months of 2003, according to Kenn Morris, director of Crossborder Business Associates. The number of crossers has been increasing since declines seen in 2001 and 2002.

The number of vehicles crossing northbound averages about 50,000 with 60,000-65,000 crossing southbound each day, Morris said.

The Border Station supports six southbound traffic lanes into Mexico and 24 northbound lanes into the United States.

All four options that have been proposed call for a new Northbound Administration Building that will provide up to 50 inspection booths, as well as a new southbound facility that will have 12 inspection booths — expandable to 24.



Administrative office space and a new pedestrian inspection building are also in the proposed plans.

The San Francisco-based URS Corp. was selected last month as the construction manager.

The 200,000-square-foot project, according to URS “involves significant cutting-edge specifications for the Department of Homeland Security and related agencies, along with extensive site work and demolition while round-the-clock operations continue uninterrupted.”

Construction won't begin until the fall of 2007 and is expected to last until 2011.

To lessen the effect on commerce, the construction phase is going to be twice as long as is typical for a border station project, Riesgo said.

“We're doing four years so that we can assure ourselves that we'll be able to maintain the level of service during construction,” he said, adding that he hopes that construction wouldn't impact the wait times.

“You never know. We're too early in the process. One of the reasons we already have a construction manager on board is so they can start working on that, because it's going to be a complex situation.”

Mexico officials have proposed relocating its southbound border station to the Virginia Avenue/El Chaparral commercial crossing just west of the existing border crossing, Riesgo said.

Three of the plan alternatives make provisions on the U.S. side for the El Chaparral option.

“If they don't relocate their facility (to El Chaparral), we'll have to get really creative and maximize the little space that we have,” Riesgo said.

Not relocating, which is option four, would mean Mexico would have to expand and improve the existing southbound crossing at San Ysidro-Tijuana. That could mean they'd have to condemn homes in the Colonia Federal neighborhood, which, as far as he's aware, they are unwilling to do.

But the San Ysidro chamber's Adato said option four is best for the business community.

He is basically against any plan that involves El Chaparral.

“The reason the business community and the residential community favor option four is just because it will have the least impact on the very limited commercial land in San Ysidro,” said Adato, who also sits on the San Ysidro Business Association board of directors. “The project itself (will) take acres and acres of redevelopment land, which is very scarce in San Ysidro.”

He explained that option four takes away the least amount of land from San Ysidro.

Adato believes Mexico is pushing for El Chaparral, which is government-owned land, instead of expanding the existing location, because it has “much stricter laws of eminent domain than we do.”

San Ysidro, which was declared an economic disaster area post-Sept. 11, is finally recovering.

One thing is clear. Adato doesn't want the new border project or a U.S.-VISIT biometric screening program that starts in December, to cause the kind of traffic delays that could ruin commerce.

“Business is coming back 100 percent now,” he said.

A public meeting was held last July in San Ysidro by the General Services Administration. More than two dozen community-organized meetings have taken place since then, many with the agency's participation, to discuss the ramifications of the seven-year project on civic and economic life, Riesgo said.

He said the agency will begin holding regular good-neighbor meetings to solicit input from eight or nine stakeholders the agency has identified, including the San Diego Association of Governments, the San Ysidro Chamber of

Commerce, Casa Familiar, the San Ysidro Business Association, and the city of San Diego.

Their input will be part of the environmental impact report, to be completed in the fall of 2005.

The report's conclusions, Riesgo said, will indicate which of the four alternatives has the most positive impact.

"In terms of the community in San Ysidro, everybody has different needs. There's definitely an east-west division. The east side businesses and homeowners and the west side businesses and homeowners," he said. "The general comment is they want to make sure that what is there, what we do, is something that's going to be functional, is going to fit the community's long-term plan. Our concerns are the same as theirs."

Final contract negotiations between the construction manager URS Corp. and the government, GSA, are expected to conclude soon so the three-year pre-construction design phase can begin this summer, said Erin Cazares, business development director for the company's construction services division. She could not disclose the amount of the award to URS.

Cazares said the majority of work on the border project will be done by the company's San Diego office staff based in Mission Valley. URS employs 175 people in San Diego.

The architect engineer, Sonoma-based RossDrulisCusenbery, Architecture Inc. was selected in February under the General Services Administration's Design Excellence Program.

"It will be a facility that the community is going to feel proud to have in their back yard," Riesgo said.
