



Bulletin

February 23, 2022

“Let’s finish the **Otay Mesa East Port of Entry** by 2023,” **U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Ken Salazar** dared the 40-person audience at the site of the new San Diego land port last week during a landmark visit. Though the stated deadline is in fall, 2024, everyone seemed to agree that getting the port done sooner is an admirable objective. But is it feasible? What was the ambassador’s intention? All key actors in the port’s completion—on both sides—took the dare very seriously, and I suspect we will be hearing from them soon. Ambassador Salazar seems to be in a hurry, what with all the backlogged infrastructure projects along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Certain questions linger. The new port entails more than construction. Staffing it is just as important. It is the greatest unknown at this time on the U.S. side. Will our congressional delegation deliver on appropriations for this, or will the port’s tolls foot the bill? On the Mexican side, we still need to make sure 10% of the right-of-way is acquired and high voltage towers and a natural gas duct are moved. The federal government has not yet bid out the construction of the access road leading to the port.

As an optimist and understanding the stakes, I believe all kinks will be ironed out in time for a 2024 launch. The port will have 20 lanes, 10 for vehicles and 10 for trucks, it will be reversible, meaning that northbound and southbound lanes will adjust upwards or downwards, depending on traffic intensity. The new port will also offer an intelligent transportation system that, among other things, will let drivers know accurate wait times for each of the lane types well before they arrive at the port. The port will be modular, so it will be able to expand in number of lanes as traffic increases over the years.

The ambassador’s remarks came as part of an unprecedented meeting of binational leaders underscoring the latest port milestones on both sides of the border, bringing the project closer to reality in 2024. The significance of a meeting attended by the Lieutenant Governor of California, the Governor of Baja California and the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico cannot be overstated.

- On the California side, all connecting roads to the port have been built. **Caltrans** and **SANDAG** have been right on schedule and are now eyeing a bond issue to pay for the port itself. The guarantee will be a percentage of toll revenue. The toll will be distributed between the U.S. and Mexico, marking the very first time something like this has ever happened in a land port between our countries.

- **Rogelio Rivero, Director of Highway Development for the Infrastructure, Communications and Transportation Ministry of Mexico**, stated that there is already an agreement to purchase 90% of the right of way and that the balance is under negotiation. He added that they have in place the executive plan for the construction of the access road to the port. This is a road that will be bid out to a private company. Sempra's gas lines as well as the Mexican Electricity Commission's (CFE) towers will be relocated. There is already an agreement with CFE to move the towers and the agreement with Sempra is close to being signed.
- **Dr. Calixto Mateos, Nadbank Director**, told the audience that the bank will be the custodian for toll revenues and for their distribution to each country. This role recognizes the importance of the bank's commitment to the region and will surely spark additional involvement in Tijuana and Baja California projects.
- **The State Government of Baja California** has been a catalyst for the follow up and commitments for the new port of entry. Governor Avila of Baja California sees the port as a must for her public administration. She has met with the Mexican army corps of engineers to follow up on build outs and has established a working group with the Mexican Foreign Relations and the Communications and Transportation Ministries.
- **Ambassador Ken Salazar** posed a challenge to both sides of the border. He asked that the port be finished in 2023, not 2024.

As if to stress the importance of the **Otay Mesa East Port of Entry project**, **President Andrés Manuel López Obrador** toured the site of the port in Tijuana along with **Foreign Relations Secretary Marcelo Ebrard** and **the U.S. ambassador** on February 17th. Baja California Governor Marina del Pilar Ávila was their host. Her government has been a strong supporter of the projects and has been in frequent communication with the **Mexican Army Corps of Engineers** and the **Infrastructure, Communications and Transportation and Foreign Relations ministries**.

Jorge Gutiérrez is the new mobility "czar" for Baja California. He heads **IMOS**, the Sustainable Mobility Institute. If anyone knows about the subject it is Jorge, a.k.a. "Bibi" Gutiérrez. He addressed the **Tijuana Development Council's** board in late January and spoke about a whole slew of projects the new state administration is looking at closely, including a trolley to take Tijuana workers to the San Ysidro Port of Entry as well as a new toll road hugging the international line that will connect the Tijuana Airport to Playas de Tijuana, with an exit at the San Ysidro Port of Entry. The executive plan for this project is almost

complete. There are earmarked funds from the Mexican Customs Fund to the tune of \$500 million dollars.

IMOS will also manage the regulation of vehicles imported illegally into Tijuana.

The **City of Tijuana**, the **California Air Resources Board** and **CalEPA** have signed an agreement to provide the city with 50 air pollution sensors. This is an important breakthrough where I was involved. I am glad to see that both sides agreed on an MOU to deliver the units. Though they are not grade AAA sensors, which are upwards of \$150,000 each, the information they will capture will help Tijuana ascertain where the most impacted areas are and will enable the city to educate citizens about measures to mitigate pollution levels.

“Pre-vetting” and “pre-clearance” will become familiar words in the **U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP)** jargon in the next decade. The agency is already using facial recognition or “simplified arrival” at all pedestrian ports. It is close to launching a pre-vetting feature on the **CBP1 App** for pedestrians at San Ysidro, where they reserve a crossing time. Many will balk at using it at first, but if people see the value, they will use it.

Already, the CBP1 App is being used for **I-94s** (tourist visas). This is one of the first steps in moving travelers to using their smart phones to communicate with the agency.

The next iteration of the **Border Innovation Challenge** is underway. The **Smart Border Coalition** and the **Rady School of Management** will be coordinators and will enlist a national organization to boost the scope of the competition. We are planning the public event for early December.

The Challenge seeks ideas and business plans from students and entrepreneurs on both sides of the border to solve logistics issues in and around the ports of entry. We want to increase the range of competitors this year by adding creative projects in the medical, tourism, manufacturing, and software development categories.

Let’s remember that a “smart” border is really about a narrative that highlights how to use a highly connected network of people to improve the cross-border relationship. This relationship is expressed in different areas, from logistics, to manufacturing, transportation, public health, and tourism.

The **CaliBaja Crossing Experience Group** held important meetings to solidify its intent to improve the experience of travelers crossing the border. Kudos to **Mario López** of Sempra/Inova, **Paco Fimbres** of Calimax, **Kenia Zamarripa** of the San Diego Regional Chamber, **David Pérez Tejada** of the Baja California Government, **Paty Hernández** of the Tijuana EDC, **Laura Araujo** of Tijuana Innovadora and the **World Design Capital**, **Sarah Moga Alemany** of the City of San Diego and many others who are part of this outstanding group and keep things moving.

Mexican Chef **Pati Jinich** is preparing a food/border narrative extravaganza this fall, when a dynamic cohort of Tijuana and San Diego friends hopes to bring her here to record her highly successful “La Frontera” program, which aired nationally on **KPBS TV** last year and reached over 1.3 million views in its first showing. That show was about border culture and food from **El Paso/Juárez to Laredo/Nuevo Laredo**.

This time, the show will feature the Western border, focusing on **CaliBaja** (please see <https://patijinich.com/>). The show will use “breaking bread” to discuss, describe, and debate the great stories we have and the future we want. anyone interested in being a sponsor or contributing to this noble production, should let me know.

Pati has won the prestigious **James Beard Award**, recognizing culinary professionals in the U.S., 3 times and is a *New York Times* best-selling author, among many other accomplishments.

South County EDC’s board meetings always deliver important content, and the meeting on February 1st was no exception. **Héctor Vanegas** and **Phil Thom** of the **San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG)** explained the extent of the \$163 billion “**5 Big Moves**” which the agency has been promoting for the last three years. They described the “complete corridors project” integrating pedestrians, bikes, cars, buses, and trolleys and the next generation of bus rapid transit to connect all points. The largest part of the transportation transformation project is by far the **mobility hubs and flexible fleets**.

One recurring aspect of these new services is how they will impact our large **transborder community**. The story is that we have the equivalent of a whole city making its way to San Diego County every morning. Think of 140,000 people coming across every day –this would be the **third largest city** in the county after San Diego and Chula Vista. Some view this as the “19th city.” It is not entirely clear how we in Baja California and San Diego County will manage this, but some important conversations are happening.

A new Purple Line connecting San Diego’s Cross Border Express (CBX) passenger air terminal at the border with a central mobility hub. This will probably happen in the next 7-10 years, assuming voters will vote a majority “Yes” on the “**5 Big Moves**” initiative. There are talks

that Tijuana will make a **trolley** available to take an important percentage of its workforce to the **San Ysidro Port of Entry**. There are even some conversations about building a **cable car** line to connect Tijuana with the border. A more feasible project is a **toll road** connecting Tijuana's airport with San Ysidro and Playas. It will be entirely paid for with federal government money (\$500 million dollars). It is important that whatever Tijuana does, there needs to be an honest and productive conversation with **SANDAG**.

The Border Trade Alliance (BTA) has been thinking about how to enhance the “21st Century Customs Framework” developed by U.S. **Customs and Border Protection** with inputs from multiple stakeholders across the U.S. It has been striking to see how that framework is still too U.S.-centric, when it should be North America-centric. A clear example of this is the fact that before the BTA had decided to consider it, no one had spoken about sharing **eManifests** (the electronic lists that describe cargo transported by an exporter, presented to CBP) between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada.

This would avoid the current three separate national systems with three different sets of rules. This is easier said than done, but it speaks to all the work we need to do in trade and so many other areas to harmonize procedures.

Redirecting Sea of Cortez water to **Laguna Salada** in **Mexicali in Mexico** and then to the **Salton Sea** in California to avoid erosion and pollution sounds like a tall order, but there is one organization trying to do just that. **Agess, Inc.** is a California company thinking binationally in terms of putting water back into the empty Laguna Salada and supporting the Salton Sea as a consequence. The project is still in its initial phase and is looking for Mexican buy-in. Fortunately, the State of California has identified \$300 million in funding—already in the bank—for the Salton Sea. As a PUBLIC? benefit corporation, Agess would design and coordinate the project. A yet-to-be-determined non-profit would own the assets, and the states of California and Baja California would own the projects.

The **California legislature** is thinking binationally about water. **Assemblymember José Medina** has led the effort to plug in another \$20 million in funding for the State of California to use in watersheds on the Mexican side of the border. **Edgar Ruiz of the Council of State Governments West** (<https://csgwest.org/>) has been instrumental in making sure that Baja California is part of the team that will set guidance and rules for the use of these funds.

Francisco Bernal, Secretary of Water for Baja California, has been studying ways in which **Río Nuevo** and **Río Tijuana** areas can benefit. The California money must have some matching funds in Mexico so that both sides have “skin in the game.”

With the disbanding of the migrant encampment at **El Chaparral**, the stage is now set to reopen **PedWest**, or so it seems. In our **CBP Passenger Working Group** meeting this month, we learned there is no guarantee the pedestrian port will open anytime soon. The issue, as you may have surmised, is staffing. There are finite resources to open it based on the priority needs at PedEast and staffing the many lanes at San Ysidro.

CBP is a complex organization where there is a long onboarding process for officers, the officer academy closed during the pandemic (it has recently reopened), there is moderate-to-high turnover, and frequent overtime use impacts demeanor and morale.

The staffing need in the coming three years is large: **San Ysidro** added eight lanes with its recent expansion but still lacks personnel for them. **Cross Border Xpress (CBX)** just doubled its lanes two weeks ago; **Otay Mesa Port of Entry** will go from six to 12 pedestrian lanes this year, and cargo will have six more lanes this year. **Calexico's port of entry** will go from 10 to 16 lanes for its pedestrians. And **Otay Mesa East Port of Entry** will require several hundred officers by summer of 2024.

In light of this, it is clear that organizations like the Smart Border Coalition must strongly advocate with our elected officials and the White House to make the case for staffing and the political will to reduce wait times.

In our conversations about **U.S. Customs and Border Protection** port management, there is a topic we discuss but rarely bring up with the agency: **traveler complaints**. I realize there is some trepidation from some or many of you to express your dissatisfaction about your experience at booths. We typically remember our negative experiences but quickly forget about the positive ones.

I've learned, however, that things are not always what they seem. This week I was part of a very productive, substantive, and frank discussion with CBP about the challenges faced at the San Ysidro Port of Entry.

I brought up the issue of the traveler/customer experience as a whole and focused on traveler complaints. What was striking was that the agency is making a number of efforts to better manage the traveler experience. Most of you may not know this, but there is in fact a **San Ysidro Professionalism Service Management (PSM) Unit**. There are two individuals there who process both compliments and complaints. The primary point of contact for this is **Supervisory CBP Officer Silvia Vargas (619-662-2290)**. I hope you share this information with your networks, and let's use this channel wisely and responsibly.

The **Sonoran Institute's** Senior Director of Programs, **Francisco Zamora**, (<https://sonoraninstitute.org/>) spoke with me about its efforts to clean the **Rio Nuevo** delta in Mexicali, Mexico. The institute's mission is to “drop by drop, restore flowing rivers and healthy landscapes to enable all people and nature to thrive.”

The Mexicali lagoon system has been polluted primarily by salts and nitrogen coming from the valley's fields and illegal raw sewage releases from industry. Both Calexico and Mexicali residents have borne the brunt of this untenable situation.

Zamora and colleagues have created a master plan for the lagoon system that focuses on solutions based on wetland habitat restoration. Their budget is \$8.5 million over 3 years, and they have applied for CalEPA funding.

Tom Davis, creator of a program in National City called “**16 Weeks of STEAM**” (<https://nc16weeksofsteam.org/>) visited my office last week to ask for support but mainly to see how we can replicate this great program in Baja California. Tom created the successful program and has paid for it essentially out of his own pocket for the last three years.

Born in National City, he is an accomplished professional and at 6'5” a basketballer who still plays in international events in his age group. He never forgets his Mexican heritage (his mother was Mexican) and wants to continue giving back to Hispanic and Mexican youngsters through his program. He is aware that “STEAM careers can positively impact the socio economic vitality of the region.”

I can see how 16 Weeks of STEAM could be turned into a binational program connecting elementary school kids in Tijuana with school children in San Diego. We have good examples of cross-border university connections, but we do not have much in terms of connections at a younger stage.

On a special note, somewhat removed from border issues, I'd like to recognize the civic work of **Shawn van Diver** of Consulting Company **Deloitte**. Other than his important role in linking his company to many global projects and border work, Shawn is involved with **Afghan Evac** (https://afghanevac.org), a “coalition of private, non-profit, government, and all-volunteer organizations focused on deconflicting communications, effort, and systemic issues across the full enterprise of efforts focused on helping Afghans evacuate and resettle safely, swiftly, and within the bounds of the law.”

Until he let me and a larger group of colleagues know about it, I didn't know there was a citizen effort that was born out of "similar and heartbreaking circumstances: an unexpected text from their former Afghan interpreter or driver who remained behind; a call for help from the allies who became family following their resettlement in the US; a desperate plea from the patriot who volunteered to work side-by-side with US troops in support of our mission."

This goes to show that many of the people who care for the binational relationship also do great work in other areas and put San Diego and Tijuana on the map while doing so. It is also an example of how an urgent issue gets an organized and timely resolution. This is food for thought as to how we must approach the issues we have at the border.

Our next online **Stakeholders Working Committee** meeting will convene on March 3rd from 9:00a.m. to 11:00a.m. The event is virtual –hopefully for the last time.

Register in advance for this meeting:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZYtdOurrz8qHtRYWQZ6uKbjrdjDNglBboiY>

After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the meeting.

Sincerely,

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Executive Director

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