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More SENTRI lanes at Otay sought

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Filner says additional roads, jobs will bring heavier border traffic

By Diane Lindquist
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

November 17, 2006

Rep. Bob Filner is asking the Department of Homeland Security to increase the number of SENTRI lanes at the Otay Mesa port of entry because the one lane devoted to the fast-pass border crossing program can't handle the heavy amount of current and future traffic.



Union-Tribune
Rep. Bob Filner, D-San Diego, calls Washington "way behind" on border management.

In a letter this month to Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, Filner, D-San Diego, called for "immediate action" to designate three additional lanes that can be used for SENTRI travelers when traffic backs up in the fast-pass lane.

"They're way behind doing what they should," Filner said in a phone interview from Washington yesterday.

The recovery of Baja California's maquiladora manufacturing industry, which employs many supervisors and workers who live in San Diego, has added more frequent crossers to the traffic at Otay Mesa, he said.

In addition, the recent completion of the Corredor 2000 highway that skirts the perimeter of Tijuana is routing more tourists and residents from the southern part of the city and Rosarito Beach through the Otay crossing.

Traffic is likely to increase even more, Filner said, after June when the South Bay Expressway is expected to open, linking the binational Otay Mesa community to the rest of the San Diego highway network and a newly completed shopping center in Eastlake.

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"Part of controlling the border is being more efficient with the frequent crossers," he said.

By doing so, Customs and Border Protection would be able to concentrate more on illegal crossers and those carrying contraband, Filner said.

Adding more SENTRI lanes at Otay "is a lot more cost-effective than a lot of other things they're contemplating," he said, in a reference to Congress' recent approval of construction of 700 miles of fence along the U.S.-Mexico border.

A spokeswoman for Customs district director Adele Fasano, who also was sent a copy of Filner's letter, did not respond to a request for comment.

But Alejandra Mier y Teran, director of the Otay Mesa Chamber of Commerce, said Filner's letter might help spur action in Washington, D.C.



U-T file photo
Vehicles waited in the fast-pass lanes at the San Ysidro border crossing. Rep. Bob Filner has called for more lanes at the Otay Mesa port of entry to handle the traffic he projects will only get heavier.

"I think Customs and Border Protection here is very aware of the need, and the letter from Congressman Filner will be helpful to them," she said. "We're very happy that he did that."

Mier y Teran also has noticed increased traffic at the Otay Mesa port of entry.

Besides the reasons cited by Filner, she said there has been a lot of new residential and commercial development in the Otay area. In addition, Customs and Border Protection, which had suspended the issuance of new SENTRI passes for several months, is taking applications again after moving the process online.

Besides the one SENTRI lane at Otay, there are four SENTRI lanes at the San Ysidro port of entry, one of which can be converted for use by regular passenger vehicles when SENTRI traffic is light.

Wait times, especially

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for frequent crossers who do business on both sides of the border, are having a detrimental impact on the binational economy, said Gary Gallegos, executive director of the San Diego Association of Governments, the organization that oversees the region's transportation issues.



A study completed for SANDAG last year estimated that border waits are costing the area economy \$4.2 billion annually.

“Anything that's going to improve border wait times we think is on the right track,” Gallegos said.

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