



New "Border Action Plan" needs action from Western Canadians

By Donald Alper

In 2011, President Obama and Prime Minister Harper signed a deal that promises a broad menu of potential changes and improvements at the Canada/USA border.

The Beyond the Border Action Plan has received widespread interest because of the huge potential to improve and streamline the trade and security relationship between our two countries.

However, many of the provisions are open-ended and require continuing attention to insure they are defined and enacted. It is vitally important that Canadians are proactive in the development process. While also vital to the USA, Americans have other interests and distractions.

To date, progress has been made by the U.S.-Canada Beyond the Border Working Group, made up of government officials on both sides. It has concentrated on moving the two countries toward joint threat assessment, improved information sharing, traveler entry-exit record keeping and sharing, and more sophisticated screening of cargo and passengers at the "perimeter" -- when they first enter North America.

These efforts have several goals and targets that give an idea of what the two governments hope to accomplish through these negotiations to make the border more user friendly. Most importantly, the United States and Canada hope to eliminate duplicative inspections and reduce red tape for travelers and shippers.

To accomplish this, the governments are looking at ways to expand participation in trusted traveler and shipper programs, conduct more pre-clearance of shipments before they reach the border, and make things easier for business travelers who cross regularly.

The new Border Action Plan has several provisions that will directly benefit the Pacific west region. Amtrak southbound trains will be faster and more reliable because security inspections will take place in Vancouver rather than at the border in Blaine. Lanes that can accommodate NEXUS travelers will be expanded at some or all of the four main crossings in Whatcom County. Business travel will be made easier by incorporating business "expedited crossing" documentation into NEXUS. Truck congestion will be eased by streamlining the processing of documents by customs and other government agencies.

Fixing problems is what this deal is about. But, this is also an opportunity to envision what else can be done. What could be accomplished in this dynamic region if our energies and resources were focused at least as much on leveraging the assets of this border region as they are on managing border problems?

We are more than pleased to join forces with other to develop a broad-based coalition of regional organizations and individuals to actively participate in the ongoing Beyond the Border process.

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