

MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL

Huge divide remains between San Diego and Tijuana on many fronts, but vows by Filner to push better partnership have reawakened visions

By [Sandra Dibble](#) 12:01 a.m. Jan. 27, 2013 Updated 10:25 p.m. Jan. 25, 2013

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A joint economy that creates more jobs on both sides of the border. A binational hub of technological, cultural and culinary innovation. An ever-closer collaboration on shared water resources. A united regional voice that echoes loudly in Washington, D.C., and Mexico City.

These are the dreams of people pushing for stronger ties between Tijuana and San Diego.

Despite numerous efforts over the years, the two cities have remained distant neighbors on many fronts. Following a difficult decade that saw tighter U.S. security measures, drug violence in Mexico, a drop in U.S. visitors to Baja California and an economic downturn on both sides, vows by San Diego Mayor Bob Filner to boost binational ties have reawakened visions of the region's myriad possibilities.

"There is an enormous potential for connections that have not been made, of ties that haven't been woven," said Tonatiuh Guillén López, president of Colegio de la Frontera Norte, a Tijuana-based think tank with offices along Mexico's northern border.

"San Diego and Tijuana have a shared destiny," said Teddy Cruz, co-director of the Center for Urban Ecologies at UC San Diego. The region must be re-imagined, he said, "not only through issues of security, but through shared natural and socioeconomic resources."

Above all, there must be "a culture shift," said Diane Takvorian of the San Diego-based Environmental Health Coalition, which has projects in both countries.

"I have always felt that San Diego has shunned its border location," she said.

Filner is not starting from scratch. Cross-border collaboration has taken place at numerous levels, inside and outside of City Hall. San Diego's previous mayor, Jerry Sanders, championed efforts to promote the shared region and nurtured ties with two Tijuana mayors — Jorge Ramos and Carlos Bustamante.

"Mayor Sanders brought attention once again on the border," said Alejandra Mier y Terán, executive director of the Otay Mesa Chamber of Commerce. "I think Mayor Filner can take it to the next level with his contacts in D.C. and congressional know-how."

Here are some areas that champions of binational ties say would benefit from forceful leadership, stronger commitment and greater resources:

Border crossings

There is broad agreement on one issue: Something must be done about long northbound waits at the San Ysidro and Otay Mesa border crossings. Pedestrians and drivers often wait for hours to reach inspection booths, the result of travel-document and security requirements after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

With rising congestion has come a dramatic decline in crossings: Noncommercial, northbound crossings at the Otay Mesa and San Ysidro ports of entry totaled 40.6 million in fiscal 2011, compared with 61.5 million in 2003, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

“It’s very difficult to have two cities doing business together, sharing cultural events, visiting family and friends ... when the border waits are so long,” said José Larroque, a Tijuana attorney who co-chairs the Smart Border Coalition, a binational group that has long lobbied for more efficient crossings.

Border crossings are the federal government’s domain. But Larroque and others are counting on Filner’s two decades as a congressman representing the California border to help push for funds to complete a \$583 million upgrade of the San Ysidro port, as well as expansion of the Otay Mesa vehicle and commercial inspection facilities.

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Congress has funded only the first phase for San Ysidro — \$292 million for renovations of the northbound vehicle inspection lanes. When that phase is finished in September 2014, there will be 46 booths — up from the current 33. An additional 17 booths would be built in the third phase.

People who continue to cross are spending money: A study last year by Crossborder Group, a San Diego-based marketing and consulting firm, shows that Baja California residents shelled out as much as \$15 million a day in San Diego County. But that is only a fraction of the full potential: The latest figures from the San Diego Association of Governments show that inadequate infrastructure at the county’s border crossings — at Tijuana, Otay Mesa and Tecate — cost the U.S. and Mexican economies \$7.2 billion and 62,000 jobs in 2007.

Border congestion isn’t just a financial issue, said Serge Dedina, executive director of the Imperial Beach-based Wildcoast, an environmental group with offices on both sides of the border. “It’s made the whole issue of binational cooperation logistically very difficult.”

Perceptions of Tijuana

Filner “has the opportunity to get out there and publicly say that Mexico is important to us,” said Paul Ganster, director of the Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias at San Diego State University. “Just that public statement alone will help set a more positive framework.”

Devastated by reports of drug-related violence in Baja California, tourism promoters there have been especially vocal about the importance of changing the region’s image. But the stigma has affected other sectors, from industry to philanthropy.

A 2010 poll by the San Diego Foundation asked 1,200 county residents about five possible economic development strategies. Focusing on the “Mega-Region” of San Diego County and Baja California got the lowest response, with only one in 10 respondents listing it as their top choice.

Public statements can help, but Richard Kiy of the International Community Foundation said the key is creating greater awareness of cross-border economic interdependence. “I believe the only way attitudes will change is when people start to see the economic benefits,” Kiy said.

The push to change perceptions should start in areas of the county that have not traditionally engaged with Tijuana, said Denise Moreno Ducheny, a former California senator and a senior analyst at the University of San Diego’s Trans-Border Institute. While many South County residents understand the border region’s importance, “North County needs to understand it, too, so that all of us together are fighting for things like more efficient border crossings.”

Economic development

Steps such as establishing training programs and developing cross-border supply chains for promising sectors — including aerospace and medical-device manufacturing — can be key to attracting new investment to the region, said Christina Luhn at the San Diego Regional Economic Development Corp.

“Making sure we have talent is crucial,” said Luhn, director of the group’s Cali-Baja Bi-National Mega-Region initiative. “That only works if we don’t see each other as competitors.”

The Tijuana Economic Development Corp. is pushing for an in-depth study that would document the economic links between Tijuana and San Diego.

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“We understand the benefit of collaborating and we try to communicate this, but we don’t have the tools to quantify this benefit,” said the group’s executive director, Flavio Olivieri.

Besides the expansions planned at San Ysidro, a number of proposed infrastructure projects on both sides of the border are expected to help shape the region’s future. Some are efforts that span the border, including a binational desalination plant, a cross-border airport terminal and the Otay East port of entry that would be financed through toll fees.

“There’s a lot of good collaboration and good planning” between U.S. and Mexican agencies, said Gary Gallegos, executive director of the San Diego Association of Governments. “But we need to implement, and part of the challenge of implementing is having the financial resources.”

Emergency planning

Disasters such as earthquakes, floods and wildfires know no borders, and emergency planners say the two cities need to work closely when these occur.

The city of San Diego has included Tijuana in its contingency planning for hazardous-material spills, but there is no formal mutual-aid pact for other disasters, said Antonio Rosquillas, Tijuana’s civil protection chief.

There is much complexity because several layers of government — local, state and federal — are involved in emergency planning on both sides of the border.

“What would happen to the border, the crossing of Americans and vice versa?” Rosquillas said. “These are issues that are in the federal domain, but of direct interest to municipalities.”

Environment

Because San Diego and Tijuana share the Tijuana River watershed, efforts to control water quality have long involved both countries — and environmentalists said continued cross-border collaboration is essential on a range of fronts.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has worked closely with the Baja California government to improve Tijuana’s wastewater treatment and collection, but cross-border flows in rainy weather continue to lead to beach closures in southern San Diego County. The Imperial Beach-based environmental group Wildcoast has increasingly focused on cross-border pollution caused by the flow of trash and sediment from Tijuana into the United States at the Tijuana River Estuary.

The potential for air pollution at the border caused by cars and trucks idling for hours at the San Ysidro and Otay Mesa ports of entry has become a growing issue as the waits have grown longer.

Education

Cross-border student exchanges have fallen steeply in both directions in recent years, and schools and cultural institutions are looking for ways to reverse the trend.

Field trips that once brought large numbers of Tijuana students to visit Balboa Park and other Southern California destinations ended with the stricter, post-9/11 requirements by U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

At the higher-education level, concerns about the safety of travel in Mexico in 2010 prompted the California State University system to cancel its programs in Mexico, including MEXUS, which allowed international business students at San Diego State University to take some of their classes at the private Cetys University in Tijuana.

Art and culture

The Tijuana-San Diego region holds great potential for cultural partnerships through events such as workshops, concerts, culinary festivals and joint exhibitions. But there are formidable barriers.

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Arturo Rodríguez, who owns Tijuana's La Caja Galería, said persuading U.S. collectors to visit has been difficult, as many are afraid to cross. "There is a high degree of production by artists in Tijuana, but the problem is that sales are low," Rodríguez said.

The relationship with Tijuana "is an incredibly rich opportunity for collaboration and to enrich the lives of San Diegans," said Hugh Davies, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, which has worked with the Tijuana Cultural Center for more than three decades. "Having a mayor who's interested — and willing to cross the border and set an example that it's safe and it's fun and there's a lot to do there — will help."

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