

May 12, 2013

San Diego Mayor Building Economic Bridges to Tijuana



Three-hour waits are not unusual at the San Diego border.

Monica Almeida/ The New York Times

By **JENNIFER MEDINA**

SAN DIEGO — Opening a satellite city office in a far-flung neighborhood is not unusual in sprawling cities like this one. But one thing sets apart Mayor Bob Filner’s newest outpost: it is in another country.



Monica Almeida/ The New York Times

When he opened San Diego’s Tijuana office this year, Mr. Filner spoke in grand terms about the future of cross-border relations. “Dos ciudades, pero una region — we are two cities, but one region,” he said, using the phrase popular among those who want more collaboration in the area. San Diego would put in a bid for the 2024 Summer Olympics, he said, but only to host jointly with Tijuana.

For years, this coastal city was widely viewed as a hotbed of illegal immigration. Neighbors traded stories of migrants hiding in their garages and hopping through their backyards. But now the region is considered one of the safest parts of the Mexican border, and the number of apprehensions of people crossing illegally is a tiny fraction of what it was a decade ago.

The changes have helped bring an astounding shift in residents’ attitudes toward the border: far from seeing it as a threat, more are embracing it as a potential economic engine for the region. Perhaps one of the most remarkable things about Mr. Filner’s efforts to bolster Tijuana is that there has been no opposition from other politicians or organized protests from conservative critics.

“We need to make the border the center, not the end — but the biggest problem we have is not security, it is openness and communication,” Mr. Filner said in an interview in his City Hall office. “People have to understand that the infrastructure that we need should be an important part of any discussion on immigration. The volume here is so incredible, yet nobody understands how much this matters. People can’t go back and forth, and we’re losing out.”

Border security has been at the center of the debate on an immigration overhaul in Washington, with many lawmakers pushing for more security and fences at the border. The bipartisan group of eight senators who proposed sweeping changes have pointed to San Diego as the example of a secure border. But here, where a multimillion-dollar secondary fence was added a few years ago, many worry about the enormous economic cost of improving security that they feel is already too tight, not too loose.

Mr. Filner and his supporters cite delays at the border crossings that frequently stretch to more than three hours as the prime example of the problems the region faces. They say that more crossing lanes and agents are needed to allow people to cross

quickly, and that technology could allow inspections to be completed in seconds rather than minutes. A [study](#) by the San Diego Association of Governments estimated that the region loses more than \$2 billion annually because of the waits.

“The political buzz made it so that there is a self-evident truth that the border was out of control, and that national stigma remains,” said Paul Ganster, the director of the Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias at San Diego State University. “It might make people from Iowa feel better knowing that it takes hours to cross the border, but a better approach is to fix the border so it functions for legitimate purposes. Right now we’re just penalizing ourselves with huge inefficiencies.”

While several former mayors have had warm relations with Tijuana officials, Mr. Filner has made cross-border relations a centerpiece of his administration, appointing a binational affairs director and mentioning Mexico at nearly every opportunity. In his inaugural speech, he congratulated the Tijuana soccer team, the Xolos, for winning the Mexican league title the day before, calling the team “our champions.” And while the Olympic Committee has already rejected the cross-border bid, Mr. Filner is not deterred.

He was elected last fall after serving for nearly two decades as the Democratic congressman representing a district that included all of California’s Mexico border communities. In Congress, he routinely complained about the long lines at [the border here](#), the busiest land crossing in the world.

There are still signs that the longstanding ambivalence about the border here remains. While other American cities along the border have deep ties — or even a reliance — with Mexico, many here say San Diego residents mostly have their back to the border and give little thought to their southern neighbor. A recent survey by one local group found that less than 10 percent of residents believed that strengthening the border region should be a priority for improving the local economy. By some estimates, more than 60 percent of San Diego residents have never crossed the border.

“People here tend to think about ourselves as the edge of the Earth, as if there’s nothing beyond the border,” said Denise Moreno Ducheny, a former state senator and an analyst at the Trans-Border Institute at the University of San Diego. “When you see a place as poor, you can tell yourself it can be ignored or mistreated. But people are starting to understand that it is the front door for a lot of good things that we want to come our way.”



Monica Almeida/ The New York Times

Mexico receives more exports from the United States than any country besides Canada, according to the North American Center for Transborder Studies at Arizona State University. At the Otay-Mesa crossing, a primarily commercial port of entry just eight miles east of the coast, some 3,000 trucks cross daily using two small local roads.

While plans to expand the larger crossing to the west have been approved, the federal money has never been appropriated. The Mexican government completed a renovation on its side of the San Ysidro-Tijuana crossing, but the plans on the American side of the border have stalled, although President Obama included \$226 million for the project in his proposed [federal budget](#) last month.



Monica Almeida/ The New York Times

“The problem has always been getting others to listen to us,” said Mayor Carlos Bustamante of Tijuana, who was born in California and attended the University of San Diego. “But we are an economic force now in a way that we were not a decade or two ago. It is in everyone’s interest to take advantage of that.”

Many business leaders here say that marketing San Diego and Tijuana as one large region can help attract jobs and have encouraged manufacturers to move operations from China to Mexico. They mention the success of DJO, an orthopedic company based in Vista, just north of San Diego, with a factory in Tijuana. Over the last several years, the company has added hundreds of jobs on both sides of the border, and several executives work in Tijuana but live in San Diego.

The commute also works the other way. Mario Lopez, Mr. Filner’s binational affairs director, still owns a home in his native Tijuana and uses a border pass designed for frequent crossers.

A poster of San Diego hangs prominently in Mr. Lopez’s downtown office, meant to remind him of the popular image of the city: sailboats docked in a marina with the picturesque bay and sunny skies in the distance. Like the view from his City Hall window, there is no trace of the border in sight. He pointed to another photo, taken from the vantage point of the hills of Tijuana, which shows a sprawling metropolis on both sides of the border.

“That’s what I have to get everyone to see,” he said.