

Big expansion ahead at border entry near San Diego

by Janine Zuniga - CNS

SAN DIEGO - Federal officials are planning a major expansion of the San Ysidro port of entry to accommodate the growing number of travelers - more than 50,000 vehicles and 25,000 pedestrians daily - heading into the United States.

Construction may begin this summer on the \$577 million project that will increase the number of lanes in each direction and realign southbound lanes. The project will include larger, more sophisticated administration buildings, as well as primary and secondary inspection areas.

San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders, who has lobbied state and federal officials for the project's funding since taking office, said Tuesday the expansion is "critically important to our region's future economic health."

"We need to move this project forward," said Sanders, speaking at the border.

The General Services Administration, which manages federal government real estate, is working on architectural and engineering designs, and on an environmental review. The expansion plan is the GSA's largest border-crossing project.

"It's going to be an incredible landmark," said GSA Administrator Lurita Doan. "Given how many people come through the port of entry, it will be a chance for us to show them something really amazing."

Doan said the funding is on track. Congress has approved \$231 million since 2004, including \$197 million in the 2008 budget. An additional \$59 million is proposed for next year.

The number of vehicles crossing the border is expected to increase by up to 70 percent by 2030, according to a San Diego Association of Governments study. San Diego County loses nearly \$1.3 billion in potential revenue each year from people who don't cross the border because of bottlenecks, another SANDAG study found.

"Quite simply, we need a border wait time of 15 to 30 minutes, and the technology to keep us well within that range," said Jason Wells, executive director of the San Ysidro Chamber of Commerce.

Wells organized the Smart Border Coalition, an association of business and community groups whose members were concerned when plans included the loss of private property. GSA has since reduced the amount of land it planned to take.

Ramon Riesgo, who heads the GSA's National Border Station Program, said another recent coalition-inspired change to the project was the addition to the draft design of a second pedestrian entry to Mexico east of Interstate 5. Currently, pedestrians enter only on the west side.

Wells said border businesses live or die based on waits at one of the world's busiest land-border crossings. He said businesses countywide depend on partners, employees and customers south of the border.

Due to prior expansions and renovations at the 32-year-old border crossing, inspection areas and offices are next to a busy pedestrian bridge. Holding cells and areas for confiscated drugs are next to rooms for travelers awaiting documents.

Plans call for the expanded port to cover 225,000 square feet of federal land, and several privately owned parking lots and a duty-free store. The government may take the land, but Riesgo said GSA officials are talking with the land owners. The duty-free store may be relocated to nearby property.

An expanded southbound I-5 will veer west just before the border then south to an area at the border used in the past for commercial inspections.

Sanders said Tuesday that Mexican officials are working with U.S. counterparts to accommodate the new crossing.

The project's first phase includes acquiring property and construction of northbound lanes. A second phase includes northbound inspection buildings, and a third phase includes the southbound roadway and renovation of a 1930s port building.

Once the design and environmental review are completed, GSA will seek development proposals. The port will remain open during construction.