



September 2020

To the Members of the United States Congress:

Since the outset of the declaration of a global pandemic, the communities and businesses along the United States' borders with Mexico and Canada have, like every other community in the country, been affected from both a public health and economic standpoint.

But border communities' economic health is directly tied to their ability to serve as gateways to international commerce. As a result, the cross-border travel restrictions instituted by the Department of Homeland Security have uniquely impacted border cities and towns more acutely than other U.S. communities.

Customers' inability to access small businesses on the U.S. side of the border, shifting definitions of what travel is considered essential, restrictions that apply only to land crossings but not to air travel, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) protocols that have exacerbated delays at some ports, and opaque and arbitrary criteria relied on by DHS to issue its mandates have all conspired to turn an already challenging economic environment into a total calamity.

On behalf of the Border Trade Alliance, we urge you to raise with DHS and the administration these concerns and press the Department to address them swiftly. We cannot understate the urgency of the situation at our borders. While DHS has acknowledged receipt of letters (enclosed) sent earlier this year from the BTA on this subject, we have not received a response.

Profound budget impacts: Our border public and private sectors are suffering economically. Local government budgets—and the ability to deliver core services like public safety—depend on bridge tolls and sales tax bases reliant on consumer activity and have been deeply impacted by restrictions on so-called “non-essential” travel. Bridge owners and operators are contending with a revenue picture that at best can be characterized as uncertain and at worst as grim.

Traffic has plunged dramatically. Cameron County, Texas, for example, has experienced a 52% drop in private vehicle crossings, leading to a 45% drop in revenue. Since October 2019, traffic reductions in Laredo, Texas have led to a \$20 million budget shortfall in that city.

The story on the northern border is equally bleak. The Peace Bridge, which connects Buffalo, New York and Ft. Erie, Ontario, has cut \$3 million from its operational budget and deferred or canceled more than \$7 million in capital projects. At the Ambassador Bridge linking Detroit, Michigan and Windsor, Ontario, private vehicle traffic has fallen so precipitously that authorities are no longer collecting tolls, as collection costs would exceed revenues.

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Essential vs. non-essential travel: Determining whether a cross-border trip via a land border port of entry is essential or non-essential varies from port to port and from officer to officer. For example, shopping trips are typically deemed non-essential. But what if the crosser plans to pick up medication at a pharmacy? Engaging in legitimate cross-border commerce should not come down to the luck of the draw as to which individual is staffing an inspection booth at any given time.

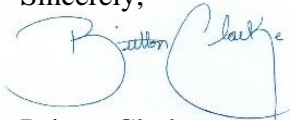
Air travel vs. land travel: We are struck by the vast disparity in treatment applied to air travelers versus land travelers. Flying into airports in border communities from points of origin in Canada or Mexico comes with few special protocols beyond those already adopted nationwide regardless of whether the visit is for business or pleasure. Whether a traveler can enter the same community by a land port of entry, however, is determined not only by the usual immigration and customs controls, but also by the nature of the visit.

New protocols disadvantage U.S. citizens and permanent residents: CBP in August announced the implementation of new protocols that include daily lane reductions during non-peak travel times. Our members have reported crossing delays into the U.S., which negatively affect U.S. citizens to whom the travel restrictions should not apply. Citizens and Legal Permanent Residents enter the U.S. at varying hours of the day to work shifts at hospitals, grocery stores, and more. What was intended to discourage land crossing attempts at ports of entry by foreign nationals is now disrupting the lives of U.S. citizens returning home to their own country.

No clear path forward for resumption of travel: Perhaps most frustrating for border businesses and communities is the total lack of communication between DHS and stakeholders regarding what public health benchmarks the Department is relying on to make its decisions. We request a clear path forward to a safe and responsible resumption of border crossings.

Border communities are suffering during this indefinite halt to cross-border travel. Businesses are closing, governments are struggling. Our members in local governments and private sector stakeholders want to be part of the solution that will allow cross-border travel to resume safely in the near future. Our economic future depends on it. We are ready and willing partners in what we hope will result in the development of a solution that will protect and prioritize the public's health while staving off total economic collapse.

Sincerely,



Britton Clarke
President



Sergio Contreras
Chair

CC: Chad Wolf, Acting Secretary, U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Mark Morgan, Acting Commissioner, U.S. Customs and Border Protection

Enclosure