

Good news along the border

By: Joe Nathanson September 8, 2016



I felt compelled to devote this column to regions other than greater Baltimore — regions further south, as far south as the U.S. border with Mexico.

What prompted me was recently reading in Cityscape, an online blog, about a planning director who was working to develop a biking trail that would connect the center of his small city to the cultural heart of a neighboring city located about eight miles away.

This sounds like a worthy endeavor and a seemingly achievable goal. What captured my attention was the fact that the planning director, Mauricio Ibarra, is a resident of Brownsville, Texas. He does his professional work for the city of Matamoros in Tamaulipas state, Mexico. Ibarra, a native of Matamoros, is one of 12,000 commuters who travel between the two cities each work day. He travels over the Brownville and Matamoros International Bridge, one of four international bridges across the Rio Grande carrying people and commerce between the two countries.

An opportunity came up for another connection in the form of a bike trail when the Union Pacific railroad relocated its rail crossing over the river, leaving abandoned tracks on both sides of the border. The bike trail along those unused tracks would make it possible to connect a green space in Brownsville's revitalized downtown district to the cultural district in Matamoros with its museums, music schools and theaters. The trail, should it be successful, would be another small symbol of why it is appropriate to think of the Matamoros-Brownville metropolitan area as a bi-national economic region with a population of over 1.1 million.

Borderplex Alliance

At the far southwestern corner of Texas lies the city of El Paso. Across the border is Ciudad Juarez, in Chihuahua state, Mexico. This region has already recognized the power of its combined economic resources and has established the Borderplex Alliance. The Borderplex identifies itself as "a bi-national metro area of more than 2.5 million people, encompassing three states [including New Mexico] and two nations — offering a globally competitive business environment."

Just last month the Borderplex Alliance hosted the 2016 U.S.-Mexico Border Summit, meeting on its first day in downtown El Paso. The summit included elected officials, corporate leaders, university representatives and scholars from both sides of the border. Among the various panel presentations was one titled, "From San Diego to Brownsville: Creating a Unified Border Coalition," offering "a new perspective that presents all border communities unified to address policy and economic issues with one voice in Washington, D.C., and Mexico City."

Other topics on the summit agenda included some nuts-and-bolts issues, including regional planning and ports of entry, developing the manufacturing supply chain across the region, and balancing trade and border security. And, you know the program had to include a presentation, "The Border During an Election Year."

The second day of the summit was held in Ciudad Juarez, with opening remarks given by U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Roberta Jackson. With additional sessions on workforce, improving the quality of life, and "Sports, the Economy and Vibrant Social Life on the Border," the summit concluded with a festive lunch and show at Viva Mexico in Juarez.

The earlier reference to San Diego served to remind me that just a year ago I was at a professional meeting in that large border community. We learned about the area's thriving biotechnology and information technology industries, the continued vital role of the port and the presence of the U.S. Navy, along with the ongoing importance of tourism. Still, the importance of being part of a vibrant bi-national economic region was cited as one of the driving factors of the area's growth. According to Bloomberg News, the Tijuana-San Diego border region is one of the most important trade corridors connecting North America and Mexico, sharing a \$230 billion economy and a population of 6 million people.

On Aug. 29, the second anniversary of Tijuana Economic Development Council Day in San Diego was celebrated. In remarks reported by the prweb blog, Mark Cafferty, president and CEO of the San Diego Regional Economic Development Corporation, stated, "Instead of building a wall, we're building a bridge. We don't see the border as a divider, rather, it is something that unites us all. The CaliBaja region is a creative melting pot full of smart people and companies that are changing the world. By working together we are creating a mega-region that serves more than 6 million diverse residents."

It seems that, in the case of metropolitan regions, there are certain economic and social realities on the ground that trump the desire to build walls.

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