

U.S. citizens to get break on border passport requirement

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Less than a year after announcing that U.S. citizens re-entering the country at land borders would soon have to present passports, the Department of Homeland Security softened its approach yesterday, announcing that frequent border crossers will be able to apply for a lower-cost alternative that fits into their wallets.

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff announced yesterday that a biometric "passport card" will be made available by late this year. Cardholders will be able to use them to enter the country at southern and northern land borders, forgoing their need to obtain a passport by the end of 2007 as was required initially.

"This new People Access Security Service, or PASS system card, will be particularly useful for those citizens in border communities who regularly cross northern and southern borders every day," Chertoff said in a statement.

The federal government's decision to offer a passport alternative follows a spate of complaints that arose from border communities and businesses after new passport requirements were announced last April. A public comment period followed.

Under those rules, which stem from a 2004 law, U.S. citizens will not be able to use state-issued driver's licenses, identification cards or birth certificates to re-enter the country after traveling within the Western Hemisphere. Documentation requirements for those returning from Mexico would be similar to those for citizens returning from Europe or Asia.

The plan devised last year calls for those returning by air or sea from Canada, Mexico, Central and South America, the Caribbean and Bermuda to present passports upon re-entry by Dec. 31, 2006. Those returning by land from Canada or Mexico have until Dec. 31, 2007, before they will be asked to present passports.

An estimated four out of five U.S. citizens do not have passports, according to data analysis of State Department and Census Bureau statistics. A passport costs \$97.

Chertoff did not specify how much the PASS system cards would cost, but a Hearst Newspapers story cited a Homeland Security spokesman saying that they would cost about \$50.

Some representatives of border businesses are pleased with the latest development, although others, particularly in tourism, don't believe the cards will be much help.

"It's a good first step," said Garrick Taylor, director of policy development for the Phoenix-based Border Trade Alliance. "It shows the government has been receptive to calls from the border." John McNeece, chairman of the Mexico Business Center of the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce, said the cards could be a step in the right direction so long as the process for obtaining one is relatively simple.



KEVIN LAMARQUE / Reuters

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced a new pass yesterday that will allow U.S. citizens to cross into Canada and Mexico with a \$50 "travel card" similar to a driver's license.

"I would certainly hope it becomes easily accessible," McNeece said. "We want to facilitate people getting across the border. It's important for the regional economy. If there are barriers, a lot of red tape, there are going to be fewer people with these cards."

Kenn Morris, director of Crossborder Business Associates, a San Diego market research firm, said he didn't anticipate the new cards doing much to lessen border wait times, a concern that business officials in the San Diego-Tijuana region have blamed for financial losses.

The San Diego Association of Governments, or SANDAG, concluded in a report last year that average border wait times of 45 minutes contribute to millions of lost trips as travelers choose to avoid the congestion, leading to billions of dollars' worth of revenue losses on both sides of the border.

According to the SANDAG report, each day more than 136,000 cars, 6,200 trucks and nearly 340,000 people travel between the United States and Mexico via the San Ysidro, Otay Mesa and Tecate border crossings.

The passport requirements have provoked anxiety among some border residents who cross regularly to work, shop and visit relatives, particularly those who don't have costly SENTRI or other federally administered border crossing commuter passes.

Debra Terry, manager of the San Ysidro Community Service Center, which provides passport applications, said that in the weeks leading up to the new year, the center was flooded with people seeking passports, thinking they needed them by Jan. 1. Terry said some had been misinformed about the deadline by U.S. customs agents during a prior re-entry.

"I think it's great that they are recognizing that it is really a tremendous burden to put on frequent crossers," Terry said, though she added that she thinks the best solution would be for the federal government to subsidize passports for U.S. citizens who cross frequently, particularly those with limited resources.

People who don't obtain cards still will have to abide by the passport requirements when they kick in, said Lorena Blanco, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Consulate in Tijuana.

That worries those who work in the tourism sector on both sides of the border, who say many tourists who head for Tijuana do so on the spur of the moment, often during trips to San Diego.

"Most of our people crossing are tourists, and they are coming from all over," said Irene Rodriguez, who does marketing for the popular Mexicoach cross-border shuttles. "And they are used to the old rule of just saying you are a U.S. citizen."

Reint Reinders, president of the San Diego Convention and Visitors Bureau, said convention visitors from other parts of the country will still be inconvenienced.

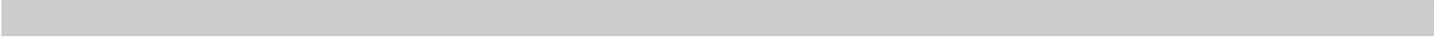
"We in the industry are probably going to have to do a lot of outreach to our visitors by really stressing to them that if you are planning to visit Mexico, you are going to require identification," Reinders said. "When you go to San Diego from New York, you don't take your passport."

Merchants in Tijuana echoed similar sentiments. Julian Palombo Saucedo, president of an association of tourism-related businesses in Tijuana, said many of the visitors he sees aren't frequent border crossers.

"They come from San Francisco, Las Vegas, Arizona," Saucedo said. "They come as tourists or on business to San Diego, and they are so close to the border that they take advantage of it and they come to Tijuana. If they are forced to apply for either a passport or an identification card, this is going to inhibit the flow of tourists into

Tijuana."

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