



# *CaliBaja Moving Forward Together* *CaliBaja Avanzando Juntos*

## Takeaways from meeting on Reopening the border: challenges, opportunities, and impacts of the 20-month closure

November 16, 2021 / 9:00-10:30 AM PT

The economic loss due to the pandemic in 2020 in San Diego is estimated at 40% for tourism and retail while 70% of manufacturing and construction businesses were economically impacted by the disruption of integrated supply chains. Surveys suggest that the smaller the company, the larger the impact. In Baja California, 98% of businesses reported some suspension of operations, reduced working hours, relocation or reduction of facilities, shifting to online or delivery service, and/or limiting consumer visits as a result of the pandemic. The ability of businesses to stay online or to use delivery services determined if they were able to stay open through 2021. At least 7% of businesses in Baja California in the period from March to May 2020 closed permanently. From March 2020 to November 2021, over 270 small businesses closed permanently in San Ysidro alone. 80% of San Ysidro businesses rely on cross-border customers and 1.3 billion dollars in sales were lost.

While some businesses were struggling to recover from the pandemic, others were thriving due to border restrictions. As consumers were trapped on one side of the border, there was an increase in the sales of those products people usually crossed the border to get. Border restrictions also led to growth of informal businesses such as personal shoppers and cross-border delivering services, especially during the holidays.

Border wait times continue to be a priority concern. The long waits at the border negatively impacted businesses. In the manufacturing sector, employees wait 4-5 hours in line; some give up and do not cross, increasing employment costs and alienating clients. Those that wait to cross still arrive late to work, affecting production. Some 3.4 billion dollars were lost in economic output to both countries. Wait times also resulted in increased air pollution and related health impacts and increased risk of exposure to COVID-19.

As part of the COVID-19 response, there was regional collaboration to coordinate the health responses and economic reactivation, to advocate for lifting travel restrictions at land ports of entry (POE), and to advance border infrastructure projects. There was substantial progress in infrastructure projects such as Otay II, the modernization of the Otay POE and Calexico West, a new lane in Calexico East, and a new initiative to manage water treatment in Tijuana, among others.

With the support of  
Con el apoyo de





# *CaliBaja Moving Forward Together* *CaliBaja Avanzando Juntos*

Both governments have collaborated with U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) throughout the partial border closure from March 2020 and in preparation to reopen the border in November of 2021. Throughout those 20 months, CBP and the Mexican consulate in San Diego were able to assist in the emergency border crossings of nearly one thousand people who did not fall into the definition of “essential traveler.” The first days of reopening in November 2021 were smooth and non-impactful because of the advance preparations. All POEs experienced an increase in traffic compared to pre-pandemic volumes except for Otay Mesa with -1% in vehicle crossings. Average wait times did not exceed two hours on weekdays and were nearly three hours on the weekend at most of the major ports. People are required to wear masks at the POE and may be asked to show proof of vaccination when entering the United States. There are multiple initiatives to speed up crossings such as the “ready lanes,” moving CBP staff to where they are needed, and disseminating traveler tips for a fast inspection process.

The pandemic changed our concept of a “prosperous border,” once limited to having good occupancy statistics for buildings and industrial facilities in Tijuana. But now we know that border prosperity must consider wellbeing in terms of crime rates, wait times for border crossings, and the environment, among other factors. The most important issues in border relations are mobility, security, migration, and trade.

There are clear lessons learned from the border’s reopening to consider for future cases of emergency. CBP is understaffed and must balance the different dimensions of mobility and security in its staff management. More funding procurement and better communication between elected officials and the Department of Homeland Security is needed. We also need to further understand how public health is affecting security at the POE and find new ways of managing these risks. To this end, we must accelerate technological changes and innovation. The socioeconomic integration of the region should be seen by federal governments as a great example of what could be achieved through bilateral cooperation and complementary immigration policies that consider local economic needs and are respectful of human rights. A central challenge is to overcome the delay in documentation processing including visa renewals, pending asylum cases, removal proceedings, and consular documentation services. Also, systematic integration is needed to make the region more attractive for investment through coordinated industrial and tax policy. There are important opportunities in rail and shipping containers that have not been taken advantage of.

The effectiveness of the border closure on improving public health is unclear even though it resulted in great losses of income and jobs, and damaged the social fabric. Data analysis is needed to decide whether this is a policy that should be replicated in the future. We must also establish a binational governance structure on public health for the next time a similar crisis emerges. The Border Mayors Summit can be a good space to start advocacy group efforts towards these objectives.

This document was prepared thanks to the support provided by Sempra and Otay-Tijuana Venture, LLC.

With the support of  
Con el apoyo de

