

NEK Business Community Fights Border Security



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Newport is known as the Gateway City, and Canadian traffic here justifies the name. Newport is just a stone's throw from the Canadian border. But impending rules that will require a passport of all travelers crossing the International border into the United States could cut deeply into tourism.

"Vermont's tourism infrastructure has a lot of room for growth." Tourism and Marketing Commissioner Bruce Hyde said. "Currently, Vermont has an occupancy rate of about forty percent, and the Canadian visitation is important."

The numbers tell the story. Hyde said 1.9 million Canadians make day trips to Vermont each year. That's not counting overnight stays. Hyde said day trips tend to be discretionary, and Canadians facing a tougher time getting across the border may decide not to bother.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vermont, held a special field hearing of the Judiciary committee, which he chairs, in a move to put the Canadian border security issue front and center in the nation's capital. That's where the economic impact of Homeland Security policy will be felt -- on Main Street. Main Street, USA, as far as officials in the northern tier states are concerned.

The issue here has not had much if any national exposure. The question here is, will Uncle Sam remain non-chalant about the loss of Canadian business? Alexandra's Kitchenware, a locally-owned house wares store, has enjoyed increased from north of the border.

"And I would say that particularly the weekend business, any given Sunday I would say, Canadian trade makes up fifty percent of our sales," owner Katy Kavanaugh told Channel 3.

Already, word of tighter border security is raising uncertainty in the business community, and uncertainty is the enemy of a robust economy. Vermont officials say the news is getting out that for a Canadian, Vermont can be a hard place to get to.

Bill Stenger of the Jay Peak Ski resort cited an example. "This past weekend I was in Montreal," he told Leahy. "The radio stations, they give the sports scores, they give the weather report --and they give the waiting time at the border now."

Observing the hearing but not participating was Canada's Counsel General, Neil LeBlanc. Leahy said he will prevail on the Bush administration to rethink Canadian border issues, and bring up the problem on Capital Hill.

"I'm going to use it in my hearings for the for the new Attorney General and ask him to weigh in on this," Leahy said. "I think we're creating a disaster where one doesn't need to be created. We're not going to improve the security of either the United States or Canada," says Sen. Leahy.

Patricia Sears, director of the Newport City Renaissance Corp., summed up the problem from her perspective on the border. "That the unintended consequences of the work that the Administration is doing to tighten the border, and the other things that have happened, are having a real chilling effect on all of us, on our economy as well as our community relations," she said.

Hyde suggested a European Union-style arrangement for allowing citizens of each country to pass freely back and forth.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security does plan to add more staff to the border to help ease backups and Vermont is adding enhanced licenses to make it easier for Vermonters to get across the border, but that won't help the Canadians trying to enter the United States.

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