

State, Local Officials Ask For Common Sense ID Approach At Border Border Problems Hurting Economy, Leahy Told

BY ROBIN SMITH, Staff Writer

Caledonian Record - Thursday October 11, 2007

NEWPORT CITY -- The federal law requiring that people present passports when entering the U.S. by land has not even gone into effect yet.

But person after person involved in business and the economy here told U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., at a field hearing of the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee on Wednesday that the impact is already being felt.

"There is damage being done right now," Bill Stenger, president of Jay Peak Resort, said to Leahy during the hearing in Newport City's Gateway Center on Lake Memphremagog. "This Main Street of Newport is being harmed right now. I am fearful of my (skiing) winter, of people not knowing what will happen Jan. 1."

On Jan. 1, 2008, current law says that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security can impose the requirement that all land travelers entering the U.S. from Canada and Mexico must show a passport.

And Homeland Security officials are forging ahead, telling Canadians in the Canadian media that they had better get their passports soon.

However, the Congress has updated that law allowing Homeland Security to delay that deadline. And an amendment making it all the more likely that the whole border ID issue will be delayed significantly until all the bugs are worked out, as promoted by Sen. Leahy, is expected to be signed this fall.

Stenger told Leahy, the chairman of the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee which oversees Homeland Security, that there have been incorrect statements to the Canadian media in the recent past about the need for new identification at the border.

"I've seen six or eight communications of the Department of Homeland Security that are inaccurate. They had to retract it," Stenger said.

The impact is being felt, he said.

Stenger cited what happened over the Columbus Day weekend, which is the Canadian thanksgiving holiday. Tourists to Vermont and points south were lined up for more than an hour at different points of entry into the U.S.

"The Montreal radio stations give weather, sports reports and the wait time at the border this past weekend," Stenger said.

Canadians are thinking twice about driving south to cross into the U.S. and spending their money, which is at par with the American dollar for the first time in 40 years.

Leahy asked those giving testimony to consider what they would say to U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Homeland Secretary Michael Chertoff.

Look at the European Community, Vermont Commissioner of Tourism & Marketing Bruce Hyde said.

Work with Canada on identifying and stopping terrorists, not stopping the millions of innocent Canadians and Americans who travel, they said.

The enhanced driver's license pilot project is promising if coordinated with Quebec and Ontario, said Dana Eidsness, director of International Trade for the Vermont Global Trade Partnership.

Local and state officials involved in the economy and tourism joined Stenger in giving testimony on the impact that Canadians have on Vermont and the U.S.

Here are a few of the statistics:

- 50 percent of all skiers at Jay Peak Resort come from Canada, affecting more than 700 jobs.
- 30 percent of flyers out of Burlington International Airport are from within Canada.
- In 2005, day visitors from Canada spent \$350,000 a day in Vermont, accounting for two-thirds of all day visitors in Vermont, more than New York, Massachusetts and New Hampshire combined.
- International tourism since 2001 dropped 17 percent in the U.S., while Canadian visitors have begun to surge again.
- Thirty-five percent of Canadians have passports, while 25 percent of Americans do.
- The U.S. and Canada enjoy the largest bilateral trading relationship in the world, with more than \$1.3 billion in goods and services crossing every day, and more than 300,000 business people, tourists and commuters cross daily.
- In Vermont, 17,500 jobs are supported by U.S.-Canada trade.

People like Patricia Sears, executive director of the Newport City Renaissance Corporation, and Tim Shea, vice president and congressional liaison for the Lake Champlain Regional Chamber of Commerce, joined Stenger in recommending that the federal government keep border identification as simple as possible while still verifiable, and support the enhanced driver's license project.

Shea said that Canadians are returning to spend money, but not to the levels they did decades ago.

One of the reasons, he said, is that they are deterred by the confusing signals about what documentation is needed and the potential for delays at the border.

Attending the hearing were residents from other border communities like Norton, Derby Line and North Troy.

Leahy told the 50 people present at the hearing that he will use their testimony at upcoming hearings about the border, security and the economy.

There is a bipartisan effort to slow down the process "before we create a fiasco," Leahy said.

"If I thought it would enhance our security that would be one thing," he said. The money that it will cost Americans to buy passports, to check all of them at the border and the loss of jobs and revenue could be spent on finding terrorists in both countries, he said.

As a formal hearing, only a select few were invited to give sworn testimony. But Leahy is seeking more written comments for the official hearing record.

You can send written comments postmarked Oct. 17 to Jennifer Price, Hearing Clerk, U.S. Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, 224 Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. Reference the Oct. 10 hearing on Economic and Community Implications of Northern Border Security.

Or send comments by e-mail to info@judiciary-dem.senate.gov and write For The Record in the subject line. The deadline for e-mail testimony is 5 p.m. Wednesday.