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Is NAFTA road through here about trade - or treachery?

By Gabriela Rico, Arizona Daily Star

It is a steel and concrete corridor that will run right through the Old Pueblo, connecting Mexico City to Edmonton, Alberta.

Its purpose is to facilitate trade among the three countries and minimize traffic and congestion for residents.

Or is it evidence of a move afoot to intertwine the three North American countries and blur the lines of sovereignty?

That's a matter of opinion.

The Canamex Corridor, as defined by Congress in the 1995 National Highway Systems Designation Act, is a joint effort involving Arizona, Nevada, Idaho, Utah and Montana.

The transportation portion calls for the development of a continuous four-lane roadway from Mexico through the U.S. into Canada.

There are two other trade corridors: One runs from the southern Mexico city of Manzanillo, Colima, through Laredo, Texas, to Canada's Prairie-to-Ports Gateway & Inland Port, anchored by Saskatoon, Moose Jaw and Regina in Saskatchewan. The other corridor veers east from Laredo through Kansas City up to Winnipeg, Manitoba.

As officials in all three countries grapple with the logistics of creating such thoroughfares, there is growing concern that the so-called "superhighways" are a visible step toward the blending of economies, cultures and resources.

The source of the fears

Much of that concern is rooted in the founding of the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America, known as the SPP, in March 2005.

The trilateral partnership, headed by the three nations' leaders, is described as an "effort to increase security and enhance prosperity among the United States, Canada and Mexico through greater cooperation and information sharing."

But references in SPP documents to a "North American region" and the "citizens of North America" send a chill through some.

"Like the old story of the frog in the pot, . . . the temperature is being raised 1 degree at a time, and soon we'll be cooked if we don't stop it," said Howard Phillips, chairman of the Coalition to Block the North American Union. "Economic integration precedes political integration."

Phillips believes the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, which removed tariffs on trade between the three countries, was the formal

first step to what he now sees ahead.

A borderless region, a North American passport and a new shared currency will emerge from a union plan, along with the highways that connect the countries, he said.

"The general public is oblivious to this," said Phillips, who also is chairman of The Conservative Caucus in Virginia.

He recognizes that some dismiss the coalition's belief as paranoid, but he points to statements made by SPP members as proof of the desire to merge.

In a joint statement released by the White House after the August 2007 SPP meeting, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Mexican President Felipe Calderón and President Bush repeatedly referred to a united "North America" and called for more collaboration among the three countries.

Phillips said that if citizens took the time to read about the trio's activities, which are outlined on the group's Web site, SPP.gov, they would need no further proof.

"Not some big conspiracy"

As the head of the multistate coalition overseeing Canamex, Marisa Walker fields repeated queries from the public about the "real reason" behind the corridor.

"No one is going to ruin our sovereignty," she said with a stifled sigh. "This is not about some big conspiracy."

The Canamex corridor does not involve new U.S. highways but rather upgrades, expansions and improvements to existing ones, Walker said.

The expansion of Interstate 10 and the Hoover Dam Bypass Project — which connects Arizona and Nevada along the federally designated North American Free Trade Agreement route, U.S. 93 — also will benefit citizens' travels, she said.

These corridors will not be off-limits to the public, and inspections at the northern and southern U.S. borders still will be in place — there is no plan that reduces security, said Walker, a former director of Mexico programs at the University of Arizona.

"It's the exact opposite," she said.

Both Canada and Mexico are implementing security standards for goods entering the United States that would expedite the cross-border inspection, not avoid it, Walker said.

Some ridicule the angst over the purported three-country merger.

"Anybody who believes it is about a great North American Union is in the league of people who believe that Elvis is still alive," Washington Post columnist Charles Krauthammer said during an interview on Fox News after the SPP meeting last summer.

Still, the commotion has prompted the SPP to add a "Myths vs. Facts" portion to its Web site, and it addresses the accusation that the three countries are constructing the highways as part of their master plan.

"Rather than evidence of a secret plan to create a NAFTA superhighway that would undermine our national sovereignty, the FHWA's (Federal Highway Administration) efforts are a routine part of cooperation with all the state transportation departments to improve the nation's highways," the statement says.

It has already started

It might be a question of semantics. Some call it a trade corridor; others call it a NAFTA superhighway.

The truth is, construction and regulation adjustments to ease congestion along the routes connecting the three countries are under way.

At the Arizona-Mexico Commission meeting in Phoenix earlier this month, panel members were briefed by officials from the United States, Mexico and Canada about the progress of the Canamex corridor.

Shirley-Ann George, vice president of international policy for the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, said Canadian and U.S. officials are working closely to streamline paperwork and permits for goods entering both countries.

Proposals include operating the U.S. ports 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and filing transit paperwork electronically instead of having the truck driver present multiple pieces of paper to multiple agencies.

On the southern end of the route, Mexico is planning to place security along the federal corridor just south of the Mariposa Port of Entry in Nogales to monitor commercial trucks headed north, said Armando Ceceña, undersecretary of the economy for Sonora.

This fall, a military checkpoint for commercial trucks will be relocated to help reduce the miles-long waiting line on the highway at the current checkpoint. U.S. customs officials are assisting their Mexican counterparts to help secure cargo before it reaches the border.

That cooperation and partnership are what stirs fear and worry.

Kevin O'Shea, deputy director for the The National Law Center for Inter-American Free Trade in Tucson, said that any time people face change, there is bound to be fear.

"I don't like to just blame the people who fear the situation," O'Shea said. "They are owed information and an explanation."

Proponents of trade must better communicate why international relationships are necessary, he said.

For example, when a U.S. company opens an operation in China, all supplies come from Asia, but if that company operates in Canada or Mexico, then U.S. companies benefit by supplying raw materials and transportation, O'Shea said.

As for security concerns, he said that citizens should be more fearful if the U.S. had an adversarial neighbor.

"There's a real national-security interest in developing more solid relations with Canada and Mexico," O'Shea said.

He said commerce and technology don't adhere to borders, and citizens should educate themselves and embrace the movement.

"Trade and globalization are a given," he said. "The whole notion that globalization is something that can be reversed or avoided is not reality. The train has left the station."

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