



Ontario Legislative Assembly

New York State Legislature



For Immediate Release: October 31, 2005

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STATE AND PROVINCIAL LEGISLATORS URGE WASHINGTON TO REJECT PASSPORT PROPOSAL FOR BORDER CROSSINGS

New York State and Ontario legislators from the binational Niagara Region today urged the U.S. government to find an alternative to the proposal pending in Washington, D.C., that would require Canadians visiting the U.S. and Americans returning home from a visit to Canada to have a valid passport when crossing the border.

The three senior members of the joint delegation issued the following statements on the plan following talks last week among members of the Western New York state legislative delegation and Niagara members of the Ontario Legislative Assembly. Their comments are being forwarded to the U.S. Department of State and Department of Homeland Security, which jointly initiated the proposal. The session, focusing on the passport proposal and other cross-border issues of concern, was the latest in a series of bilateral meetings provincial and state legislators representing both sides of the Niagara River have held in recent years.

“As presently conceived, the pending provision of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative that would require all U.S. and Canadian citizens, including young children, seeking to enter or return to the U.S. to have a passport will impede cross-border trade along the entire 5,200 mile U.S.-Canada border and significantly impair the economies of cross-border regions like Buffalo Niagara. The ‘seamless border’ that’s been driving commercial and tourism development and job growth on both sides of the Niagara River is being threatened by this proposal, which has the potential to create unimaginable delays at our region’s bridge crossings. Businesses dependent upon ‘just in time’ delivery of imported materials or exported products will no doubt think twice about locating or expanding in communities on or near the border. Surely, Washington, working with the states and our neighbors in Canada, can come up with a better alternative to ensure that our borders are secure while also ensuring a free flow of people and commerce between our two nations,” said Assembly Member Robin Schimminger (Kenmore, NY), chairman of the New York State Assembly Economic Development Committee.

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“The concern with the passport proposal is that a passport is a special travel document that most North Americans do not possess. One alternative recently raised is to create a special secure border-crossing document and ask people to apply and pay for it. This would be no less a barrier than a passport. Both approaches would discourage large numbers of Canadians and Americans from crossing the border, and hurt tourism and commerce in both countries.

“The real solution is not a new secure document, but a newly secure version of an old document. We could, for example, increase the security features of the driver’s license – a commonly held piece of identification. Security features on newly issued driver’s licenses could be upgraded to meet the standard set out in the U.S. *Real ID Act of 2005*. That would achieve greater border security while allowing us all to cross the border on the informal basis we have enjoyed throughout our history,” said Jim Bradley, Member of Provincial Parliament (St. Catharines, ON), Ontario Minister of Tourism and Government House Leader.

“We can all understand the legitimate security concerns that the United States government has articulated in order to thwart terrorist threats against both of our countries,” said Senator Dale M. Volker (Depew, NY). “As chairman of the New York State Senate Committee on Criminal and Civil Codes, I welcome the opportunity to work with our federal government and Canadian officials to address cross-border procedures and protocols. I firmly believe that we can work together to bring about security and economic procedures that will enhance the security of both nations and expand both of our diverse economies.”

A U.S. law, the *Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004*, mandated the U.S. Departments of Homeland Security and State to establish border identification standards for U.S. citizens and foreign nationals seeking entry into the U.S. Earlier this year, the agencies proposed the *Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative* which would require citizens of any age of the U.S., Canada, Mexico and Bermuda to have a passport or other accepted secure document establishing the bearer’s identity and nationality in order to enter or re-enter the U.S. at land border crossings beginning January 1, 2008. After delaying implementation of the plan, the agencies revived the initiative in September and are seeking public comment on the proposal through Monday, October 31.

At the meeting, which was hosted by Canadian Consul General Stephen Brereton at the Consulate in Buffalo, the legislators noted that:

- Canada is New York State’s primary export market, with \$30.2 billion worth of merchandise and goods exchanged during 2004.

- Almost 23% of New York’s worldwide exports were sold to Canada last year.

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- Canadians visited New York State almost 2.3 million times and spent \$487 million on trips there in 2004, while New Yorkers made more than 1.9 million trips to Canada.

- New York and Canada boast the largest bilateral tourism industry in the U.S., with residents from both places crossing the border an average of 11,343 times per day.

- In 2004, 16.5 million passenger vehicles crossed the border at just seven of the 17 land ports of entry between Canada and New York, and 89,000 buses crossed at just four of those ports.

- More than 19 million New Yorkers depend on Canada and its vast energy reserves to fuel their vehicles, power their factories and heat and light their homes.

Other legislators who participated in the discussion included Member of Provincial Parliament Kim Craiton (Niagara Falls, ON), Senator Mary Lou Rath (Williamsville, NY), Senator William Stachowski (Buffalo, NY), Assembly Member Sam Hoyt (Buffalo, NY) and Assembly Member Mark J.F. Schroeder (Buffalo, NY). Michael Kergin, Senior Advisor to the Premier on Border Issues, represented Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty. Representatives for Senator Byron Brown (Buffalo, NY), Assembly Majority Leader Paul Tokasz (Cheektowaga, NY) and Assembly Member Francine DelMonte (Niagara Falls, NY) also attended the meeting.