

Testimony of

Patricia Sears

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STATEMENT

THE NEWPORT CITY RENAISSANCE CORPORATION

Patricia M Sears, Executive Director

before the

Senate Judiciary Committee

United States Senate

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Senator Leahy, and other distinguished members of the US Senate Judiciary Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Newport City Renaissance Corporation addressing the Economic and Community Implications of Northern Border Security.

Welcome to our fair city of Newport; gateway to Vermont's Northeast Kingdom--one of only two National Geographic Geotourism destinations in the entire country. If you look out at the lake to the north you will see Canada. The border is not visible.

The beautiful international Lake Memphremagog is a rich region whose culture spans two languages, two countries, one lake. We enjoy a robust relationship with potential partnerships that would push and pull international trade and tourism. These partnerships are at risk of enduring a chilling effect because of border delays and hostility by border guards.

Momentum is building for Newport's renaissance of commercial and community development. We do not appreciate the timing of unwarranted tension and high cost of crossing the border.

The direct business impact on the downtown merchants of Newport is illustrated by Main Street proprietors Steve Crevoshay and Madeleine Winfield:

"As a business in downtown Newport, we have been profoundly affected by the new difficulties encountered by our customers when crossing the border. Please remember, and let it be an indication of the historically high level of international mixing of populations--that many Americans live on the Canadian side. Many of them are our customers. They repeatedly confide to us that the frequency of their border crossing has been diminished quite a bit. One good customer now limits her trips to Vermont to once every two weeks, and she's a U.S. citizen!"

The implications are simple and easily understood: the tighter and farther reaching the border polices, the greater the impact on the choices people make to come to our beautiful city as visitors.

Why would someone planning on a trip to Newport to shop, enjoy a meal, walk along Lake Memphremagog on the beautiful boardwalk and maybe take a boat ride--all of which might last 4 ? 5 hours--do so if they had to at the very least endure an unwelcoming attitude and long wait at the border or at the worst face outright hostility? And even if such long waits are infrequent, why would they want to take the risk they might wait that long?

How do I, as the representative of the Newport City Downtown Renaissance Corporation, or any Newport businesses owner, answer the tourist who has encountered situations like this and asks why the crossing has to feel so

unfriendly? This could become a fact of daily operations here in Newport and thus dampening enhancement, expansion or new location of businesses on Main Street.

With the US dollar currently on par with the Canadian dollar the potential for Canadian investment in property and co-locating businesses should be huge.

However, Frank Knoll, a private developer of Mount Vernon Estates in Newport offers, "Any Newport company doing business with Canada will be affected by costly restrictions. Having invested a considerable amount in infrastructure and up-scale residences for Newport area, we are having potential buyers from Canada consider not having a second home here if border restrictions and delays increase. Everyone understands the need for security. There simply needs to be a streamlined entry procedure for Canadians having a second home in Vermont."

Lately we have been made aware that a decision made from a distance and in isolation of our daily lives here in the Kingdom is aimed at implementing the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative. This initiative has a requirement for passports for land crossings between Canada and the U.S. It is scheduled for implementation in January of 2008.

This initiative could even further shut us off from visitors. Experience tells us we do not have the infrastructure in place to handle the demand for these passports. For this reason, we would propose delaying its implementation to June of 2009 at the earliest. In this way we allow the time to develop a system that meets best practices standards for border protection and satisfies the needs of the traveler.

I ask that the balance of my remarks be entered into the record. Thank you.

On a personal level, my family has altered trips north of the border to lay flowers at the grave of deceased loved ones in fear that the wait to return to the U.S. might prove to be uncomfortable for an elder family member.

From a broader perspective, and as the president of the Northeast Kingdom Collaborative for three years, I am constantly made aware of how disappointed companies are when potentially good business days are ruined due to delays at the border and how new businesses that might want to move to the area may well have serious second thoughts about doing so given the trend towards tighter less efficient border practices.

We know that there are some issues associated with this complex problem that will go a long ways towards creating a better border crossing. One is increasing the number of border patrol and customs agents on the Northern Border. This allows more people to do more things. It cuts down on the stress that makes otherwise friendly individuals act in a brisk and sometimes unfriendly manner due to stress and overwork. The added benefit is that the agents will probably be more able to react efficiently and appropriately.

When we look at the current initiative, cost is an equally important consideration-- especially for families that might want to take just an occasional day trip. The Northeast Kingdom has historically been a place where families shared common interests and culture freely. Yet the way the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative is proposed might mean that children and frequent crossers have limited access to an alternative less expensive document than the passport. Any alternative deserves considerable planning in order to execute efficient implementation.

We have relationships and seek to leverage partnerships. It has been suggested that administrators work more closely with Derby Line businesses, officials and citizens to find a sensible solution to the street closure issue. This process has begun, but it has left many feeling like the decisions on how and when to make the closings have already been made. The dialogue appears intended to placate with a desire to dictate instead of exploring with a goal of informing.

Lastly, I would like to ask the august members of the Senate Judiciary Committee to work in a bi-partisan manner to ensuring funding for the I-91 / Derby Line point of entry construction. This includes making the investment required to conduct a good faith and sincere effort to facilitate the much-needed information exchanges between the Government Services Administration, Customs and Border Protection officials, and local citizens and elected officials.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this important discussion.