

'Action Plan' sensible

By Jennifer Jones And Donald Marsh, Special to The Windsor Star

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The Windsor-Essex Regional Chamber of Commerce welcomes the Perimeter Security and Economic Competitiveness Action Plan that was released on Dec. 7 by the governments of Canada and the United States.

This highly practical document sets out a series of steps that can be taken within the next few years using currently available technology and within the existing laws of both countries.

Although some might prefer to see a grander "border of the future" vision, we believe the practical approach of the Action Plan has a number of advantages. It calls for concrete milestones to be reached by specific deadlines - some of which are as early as 2012 and virtually all of which are no later than 2015.

More importantly, because the steps do not require a new treaty or even much in the way of new legislation, the plan should not be held up by the current political gridlock in the U.S. Focusing on the things that can be done soon is the best way to kick-start the process of border reform that has been stalled for too long.

The committee of Canadian and U.S. officials that drew up the Action Plan has clearly been listening to the business community. A number of key impediments to doing business across the border are addressed.

"Trusted trader" programs, by which firms that can demonstrate a high level of supplychain security are rewarded with faster border clearance, will be expanded and harmonized across the two governments.

Duplicate inspections will gradually be eliminated under the principle of "cleared once, accepted twice." A neutral third party will look into the economic impacts of border fees that have been proliferating in recent years.

Employees of exporting firms will be able to cross the border more easily for essential functions such as aftersales maintenance and repair. Arrangements will be made to allow each country's border agencies to conduct inspections on the other country's soil at crossings where it is more efficient to do so.

The theme running through all these initiatives is an approach to border management based on co-operation between Canadian and U.S. officials. This is highly appropriate for two friendly nations for which cross-border trade is not just beneficial, but essential.

The Action Plan has significant implications for the Windsor-Essex region.

As home to the world's most economically important border crossing, and to many firms in automotive, agriculture and other industries for which cross-border trade is bread-and-butter business, we have more to gain than any other Canadian region.

But we also have more to contribute in terms of expertise in cross-border operations. We, therefore, call on both governments to consult intensively with stakeholders and to locate pilot projects in our region.

The Windsor-Essex business community stands ready to help make this plan work. Although we would have liked to see a specific reference to the Windsor-Detroit border crossings, we recognize that the governments of Canada and the U.S. have already made their unqualified commitments to border-related infrastructure in our region.

The ultimate goal of the Action Plan is to facilitate trade without degrading necessary border security functions. The key to accomplishing this is greater co-operation among Canadian and U.S. border and law enforcement agencies, and in particular greater sharing of information. Like many Canadians, we recognize the potential perils of greater data sharing, but we are confident that it can be done in a way that protects both the privacy of Canadians and the sovereignty of the government of Canada.

The joint Canada-U.S. statement of privacy principles, which will be released in May 2012, is an important piece of unfinished business for the Action Plan.

No plan is perfect. There are things we would have liked to see but didn't.

In particular, the Action Plan is light on measures to ease non-business travel across the border. We applaud the planned expansion of the NEXUS program and the mutual recognition of baggage inspection for air travellers, but we see little to help the occasional landborder users who are valued customers for our tourism and entertainment industries.

We hope updates to the Action Plan will include practical steps to make the border less burdensome and intimidating for casual travellers.

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