

Opinion

Passport plan will hurt U.S., Canada

JIM BRADLEY

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Unless it gets fixed, by 2008 all Canadians — and all returning American citizens — will need a passport to enter the United States.

The authors of the passport requirement were correctly thinking about border security. But their proposal threatens to cause so much unintended economic damage that we should all step back and rethink this idea.

Since 9/11, Canadians have shared American concerns about securing North America from terrorist attack, and have been working with the U.S. to make our common border more secure.

Ontario officials have met with their counterparts in New York, Michigan and Ohio to confer on border security issues. Canada has allocated \$7.7 billion to bolster anti-terrorism efforts, including increasing the number of Integrated Border Enforcement Teams (IBET) from five to 14. IBETs are binational intelligence-driven law enforcement teams that target terrorists, as well as gunrunners and drug smugglers.

The question is What more can be done to help us achieve the secure borders we all want, in a way that encourages the free-flowing two-way traffic that nurtures prosperity and preserves the personal liberty that is so precious to both our nations?

We have to get the answer right, because there is much at stake. Only 35 per cent of Canadian residents and 25 per cent of American residents currently hold passports. At a cost of about \$100 per passport, the plan would be a major hurdle to cross-border travel, especially for families.

We estimate that the proposed policy could suppress American visits to Canada by more than 12 per cent by 2008. In Ontario alone, the potential loss is \$570 million U.S. and 7,000 jobs. Even talk of a pending change is proving a strong negative motivator; more Americans stayed home this summer than in past years.

Quebec, the Maritimes and British Columbia would also feel the impact on their already shrinking tourism business from south of the border.

The American economy has as much to lose from the passport requirement as Canada does.

Last year, 35.9 million Canadians visited the U.S. and put \$11.7 billion into American tourism industry cash registers. That is \$2.1 billion more than Americans spent in Canada that year.

The proposed passport barrier would greatly diminish the lucrative traffic of Canadian visitors to border states for everything from Buffalo Bills, Detroit Pistons and Seattle Mariners games, to fine Italian restaurants in Niagara Falls, N.Y., Little League tournaments in Maine, and shopping safaris or sight-seeing trips.

Parents, coaches and young athletes who participate in amateur sports tournaments, to the benefit of host communities, would also face daunting obstacles to maintaining these friendly cross-border competitions.

The passport proposal would have a debilitating impact on golf courses, restaurants, hotels and resorts in tourist spots such as Myrtle Beach, S.C., and the states of Virginia and Florida, where Canadian snowbirds can be the difference between breaking even and making a profit. The risks to all concerned are clear.

That is why N.Y. Senator Hillary Clinton called the passport requirement “ill-advised.” She stated flatly, “It would be an economic disaster and would disrupt the flow of goods, services and personal relationships across the border.”

That sums up the problem. What is the solution? Michigan Secretary of State Terri Lynn Land has proposed adapting drivers’ licences for border purposes.

To its credit, the U.S. homeland security department is willing to discuss the possibility of using alternative secure documents for entry into America. This is where the Ontario government feels it can make a difference, through discussions with elected representatives and industry leaders from both sides of the border.

I am confident we can find a secure, yet readily available document that all can carry and continue to enjoy their traditional close ties.

Jim Bradley is Ontario’s tourism minister.