

April 13, 2005 - Rep. Slaughter to Meet with DHS Officials on Passport Issue Tomorrow

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Slaughter Sends Letter to DHS Expressing Concern Over Passport Policy

Washington, DC - Tomorrow afternoon at 4:30 PM EST, Rep. Slaughter will be meeting with senior representatives of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in her Washington office at the Rayburn House Office Building to discuss her objections to the implementation of a new passport requirement for access to the U.S./Canadian border.

Congresswoman Slaughter will address the following concerns with DHS:

- Why did DHS choose passports rather than codifying the requirement of a driver's license and birth certificate?

- Was any consideration given to the dramatic consequences that this initiative would have on U.S. - Canadian trade relations, as well as the impact on northern border economies?

- What assurances can they give that NEXUS and FAST will be included in the final regulation?

- To whom and where can constituents write DHS with feedback on this initiative? To date, DHS has not given Rep. Slaughter's office an answer to this simple question.

Until these concerns are fully addressed, our office recommends that if constituents have comments or questions for DHS regarding the proposed policy, they should contact:

The Honorable Randy Beardsworth

Acting Under Secretary for Border and Transportation Security,

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Washington, D.C. 20528

In addition, one week ago, on April 7th, Rep. Slaughter sent a letter outlining her opposition on the passport initiative to the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of State . A copy of her letter is included below:

The Honorable Randy Beardsworth

Acting Under Secretary for Border and Transportation Security,

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Washington, D.C. 20528

The Honorable Maura Harty

Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs

U.S. Department of State

2201 C Street NW

Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Beardsworth and Secretary Harty,

I am writing in strong opposition to the Departments of State and Homeland Security's (DHS) Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking on the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative. As a Member of Congress representing a district on

the northern border, I oppose requiring passports for entry into the U.S. via Canada because of the devastating impact it would have on U.S. tourism and trade. Accordingly, I urge DHS to review the regulation and move to expand the NEXUS and Free and Secure Trade (FAST) programs.

As a former member of the U.S. House Select Committee on Homeland Security, I am very familiar with the complicated issues that DHS faces as it works to increase security along our northern border. However, it is imperative that we balance our need for enhanced border security activities with our need to maintain strong channels for tourism and trade. My congressional district, which includes Niagara Falls and Buffalo, serves as an annual gateway for 14.5 million individuals who enter the United States across the Niagara River bi-national bridges. Tourism is the backbone of the local economy, as Niagara County is home to a rich array of historical and cultural attractions, including the Niagara Falls State Park, the Erie Canalway Trails, and the Niagara Wine Trail. Additionally, the bi-national bridges are a cornerstone of our national economy. For example, the Peace Bridge, connecting Buffalo to Fort Erie, is the country's busiest border crossing, with over 1.3 million trucks and 20 billion dollars of commerce passing over it each year.

As you know, I have worked tirelessly over the past two years to ease traffic congestion at our bi-national bridges in order to facilitate both tourism and trade. During this time, truck inspection delays have improved and NEXUS and FAST programs have expanded. However, I am very concerned that the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative will impede the number of tourists entering the U.S. and worsen the congestion at our bi-national bridges.

I have long been an advocate of the NEXUS and FAST programs. NEXUS provides the most comprehensive security check of trusted travelers available and affords the opportunity to achieve the goal of a secure border, while at the same time expediting border crossings for travelers. The FAST program allows U.S./Canada partnering importers expedited release for qualifying commercial shipments, ensuring security and safety while enhancing the economic prosperity of both countries. Rather than simply requiring passports for entrance into the country, DHS must do all it can to promote and expand the NEXUS and FAST programs. Instituting a common-sense border policy that includes expansion of NEXUS and FAST would ensure that the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative does not stymie economic growth along the Northern border and limit trade opportunities with Canada.

I would appreciate your attention in reviewing this request. Please direct all questions to Colby Hagen, of my staff, at 716-853-5813. Thank you for your timely assistance with this matter, and I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

Louise M. Slaughter

Member of Congress

Background

Last week, the Dept.'s of Homeland Security and State announced that beginning in 2007, all individuals entering the U.S. from the Canadian and Mexican border will be required to have a passport.

The initiative stems from the Intelligence Reform bill, passed last December, which included a section requiring DHS/State to "develop and implement a plan as expeditiously as possible to require a passport or other document, or combination of documents, deemed by the Secretary of Homeland Security to be sufficient to denote identity and citizenship, for all travel into the United States."

The hope by many was that DHS would codify the existing practice of requiring a driver's license and birth certificate for re-entry, not actually require a passport for all individuals.

District Impact

- The initiative will worsen the congestion problems at our bi-national bridges, causing irreparable harm to our nation's trade relations with Canada. For example, the Peace Bridge is the country's busiest border crossing, with over 1.3 million trucks and 20 billion dollars of commerce passing over it each year. Yet many trucks stay idle for three hours or more as they wait to go through border inspection. This problem will worsen if passports are required.

- Requiring passports will cause irreparable harm to the domestic tourism industry, especially in Niagara Falls.

- The cost of a passport -- \$97 per person - is prohibitively expensive for middle-income families. This initiative will limit vacation opportunities, hurting the Canadian and U.S. tourism base.