

Oct 11 2005 - Slaughter Urges More Time for Public Comment on Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative

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Says Economic Impact of Plan Should be Made Available Before Comment Period Ends

Washington, DC - Rep. Louise M. Slaughter (D-Fairport), Ranking Member of the House Rules Committee, has sent a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff asking for an extension of the public comment period on the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative until an extensive economic-impact analysis has been conducted and been made available.

"As you may be aware, I oppose the WHTI in its current form, in part because of the serious impact it will have on commerce and border economies," Rep. Slaughter said in the text of the letter. "I continue to believe - as do the mayors, Chambers' of Commerce and bridge commissioners in my district - that the WHTI was developed without consideration of the economic consequences or in consultation with border communities," she added.

"Security must be our nation's top priority, but for solutions to be effective and proficient, they must be developed in real consultation with local border communities," Rep. Slaughter continued. "By excluding economic analysis in the WHTI proposed rule, you have made it difficult for Members of Congress and local communities to voice their concern with the rule's negative impact on commerce."

Rep. Slaughter believes that other border security systems, such as the NEXUS Program, would enhance border security without hindering local economies.

Her letter to Mr. Chertoff and Ms. Rice comes in anticipation of an October 24th meeting hosted by Rep. Slaughter featuring officials from the Department of Homeland Security and the State Department, along with regional elected officials and business leaders. The future of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative will be discussed, as will other potential approaches to promoting cross-border security.

The full text of the letter can be found below.

October 7, 2005

The Honorable Michael Chertoff

Secretary

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

108 Federal Office Building

Washington, D.C. 20502

The Honorable Condoleezza Rice

Secretary

U.S. Department of State

2201 C Street, NW

Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Chertoff and Secretary Rice:

I am writing to request that you extend the public comment period on the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI) until an extensive economic-impact analysis has been conducted.

As you may be aware, I oppose the WHTI in its current form, in part because of the serious economic impact it will have on commerce and border economies. I continue to believe - as do the mayors, Chambers' of Commerce and bridge commissioners in my district - that the WHTI was developed without consideration of the economic consequences or in consultation with border communities.

There are several concerns with the WHTI that DHS and State have not addressed in the proposed rule. Passports - or other alternative documents - will pose a significant financial burden for families along the border. At the cost of \$97 per passport, families of four will need to spend \$400 dollars to cross into Canada. For families who have been crossing the border for years and are struggling to make ends-meet, paying this amount to travel to Canada is not financially feasible.

Conversely, potential visitors to the U.S. from Canada will choose to go elsewhere rather than paying for a crossing document. For the region I represent, this will mean a steep decline in visits to the local wineries, cultural institutions, and sporting events. This tourism is critical to the health of our regional economy.

Unlike the WHTI, DHS has included economic analyses in previously proposed rules, including the Transportation Security Administration's proposed screening cargo rules in 2004 and the Maritime Transportation Security Act of 2002. These analyses' allowed interested stakeholders to evaluate your economic assumptions and to offer suggestions for improving the rule. DHS has indicated to the Government Accountability Office that an economic analysis will be undertaken once the public comment period has ended. This is unacceptable and unfair to the border communities that will be most adversely affected by the WHTI.

Security must be our nation's top priority, but for solutions to be effective and proficient, they must be developed in real consultation with local border communities. By excluding economic analysis in the WHTI proposed rule, you have made it difficult for Members of Congress and local communities to voice their concern with the rule's negative impact on commerce.

I, therefore, request that DHS and State extend the public comment period on the WHTI until an economic analysis is complete. Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,

Louise M. Slaughter

Member of Congress