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Plans for new port of entry in Otay Mesa expanded

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SANDAG and Caltrans recently revealed that the planned Otay Mesa East Port of Entry will have 20 lanes with 10 in each direction, but it is unclear when the border crossing will open for business.

The plans were unveiled during a meeting at the Otay Mesa Chamber of Commerce.

The project is a joint venture between SANDAG and Caltrans, in collaboration with state and federal partners in the U.S. and Mexico. The plan is to create a 21st century, high-tech border crossing for the San Diego-Baja California mega-region. The crossing is being de-

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signed to enhance regional mobility, fuel economic growth, and binational trade.

While current average wait times along this part of the border are between 90 minutes to two hours today, Caltrans and SANDAG warned that border wait times could climb to more than six and a half hours if the Otay Mesa East crossing isn't constructed.

The report said reducing vehicle wait times and building in smart technologies will help reduce emissions and improve air quality in the border region as well.

SANDAG and Caltrans said the project will include the completion of the SR 11 toll road leading to and from the new crossing, and it has \$498 million in committed funds. With ongoing increases in labor and material costs and other factors, such as any construction delays, the total buildout cost is still uncertain. SANDAG, Caltrans and the Otay Mesa Chamber of Commerce agree that the need is a critical one.

"The proposed border improvements will provide fast, predictable, and secure border crossings by constructing a four-lane tolled road connecting directly to a state-of-the-art Customs & Border Protection Land Port of Entry and a California Highway Patrol Commercial Vehicle Enforcement Facility," SANDAG and Caltrans stated.

The two transportation agencies added that as the U.S.-Mexico border region grows, there is an increasing need to improve the commercial movement of goods, services, and passengers through an efficient, integrated system.

"Currently, more than 90 percent of California-Mexico trade is moved by truck," the report stated. "In 2018, the Otay Mesa and Tecate ports of entry processed a combined \$47.5 billion in total bilateral trade, and that number is expected to grow over the coming years. The [Otay Mesa East Port of Entry] project will facilitate job growth and new economic opportunities for private sectors on both sides

of the border."

Other features are being designed to make the new port of entry a 21st century complex. These include a new border wait time detection system, an advanced traveler information system to improve route planning, and technologies that will help optimize port of entry capacity to decrease congestion and wait times.

With multiple segments of SR 11 already completed, the construction of the toll road now moves to Phase 2B, which will connect the Siempre Viva Road interchange to the toll road. Construction on that portion of the project is expected to be completed sometime this year.

Phase 2C will build the technology for the toll collection system and related infrastructure. That work is expected to be completed in 2021 – the same year that construction on the port of entry itself is scheduled to start.

Otay Chamber of Commerce executive director Alejandra Mier y Teran conceded that while the toll road should be completed by the end of next year, "it could be a road to nowhere," if the corresponding infrastructure isn't built on the Mexican side of the border in a timely fashion.

Nevertheless, Mier y Teran said she is excited about the progress thus far, and eagerly awaits the financing that will make the project possible. The financing package, which will be fueled in large part by Trade Corridor Enhancement Program (TCEP) funds, is expected to be completed by the end of the year.

Assuming all goes as SANDAG, Caltrans, and Mier y Teran would hope, final agreements with Mexico could also be completed this year. These accords would ideally be reached concurrently with agreements with the California Border Patrol and the General Services Administration as well.

When asked when she thought the project might be completed, Mier y Teran said it is difficult to tell.

"It could be as early as the end of 2023, or it could be as late as 2025," she said.

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