

OPENING STATEMENT OF REP. BRIAN HIGGINS

HEARING: "KEEPING PACE WITH TRADE, TRAVEL, AND SECURITY: HOW DOES CBP PRIORITIZE AND IMPROVE STAFFING AND INFRASTRUCTURE?"

SUBCOMMITTEE ON BORDER AND MARITIME SECURITY

APRIL 19, 2016

My congressional district consists of portions of Erie and Niagara Counties, including the cities of Buffalo and Niagara Falls, and sits adjacent to America's maritime border with Canada along the Niagara River and the eastern shores of Lake Erie.

Buffalo is home to the Peace Bridge, the busiest passenger crossing on the northern border and a crucial link between the economies of Western New York and Southern Ontario and our two great Nations. Each year, \$40 billion in trade crosses the Peace Bridge, spurring \$227 billion in economic activity.

Niagara County is home to three more international crossings, the Rainbow Bridge, the Whirlpool Bridge and the Lewiston-Queenston Bridge which are also critical to travel and tourism in the region.

Cross-border travel, the efficient flow of goods and people across the border, and the security of our ports of entry are vital to the communities I am privileged to represent. Unfortunately, U.S. Customs and Border Protection's Office of Field Operations continues to be understaffed at ports of entry based on the agency's own staffing model. Staffing shortages slow legitimate crossers and makes it more difficult for law enforcement officials to spot the handful who may pose a concern.

In addition to the staffing challenges, CBP operations at the Peace Bridge are hindered by inadequate infrastructure, including insufficient booth capacity for a port facility of its size, as well as a dysfunctional plaza that results in crossing inefficiencies. In my congressional district, we see the slowdowns particularly on summer weekends, as locals and tourists alike seek to enter the U.S. from Canada. That season is right around the corner, and I know I will be hearing from my constituents and area businesses about their concerns.

I hope to hear from our CBP witnesses today about what they are doing to increase staffing for ports of entry, including hiring the 2,000 CBP officers funded by Congress in recent years, both in the near term and over the long run. Similarly, we know that additional investments in port of entry infrastructure are necessary to deal with increasing cross-border travel and trade and evolving security threats.

New programs, such as land preclearance, will require additional infrastructure but will pay significant returns on those investments. I have long been a strong proponent of preclearance at the Peace Bridge in Buffalo. Because of the unique infrastructure, location and space constraints we face at the Buffalo Port of Entry, and the existence of sufficient acreage on the Ft. Erie side, the Peace Bridge was chosen for a preclearance pilot in 2004. Now that full preclearance is being revived, I believe the Peace Bridge would be ideally suited for the first land preclearance site.

I was greatly encouraged by the announcement made last month by President Obama and Prime Minister Trudeau regarding the program, and am proud to be an original cosponsor of legislation that would provide the legal framework needed to move forward with expanded preclearance.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about how the Department of Homeland Security and the General Services Administration, with support from Congress, can properly staff and resource our Nation's ports of entry, including the ones in my congressional district and those of my colleagues here today.

Finally, I am very glad we are joined by Tony Reardon, National President of the National Treasury Employees Union, which represents rank-and-file CBP officers, including many of my constituents.